THE

GREAT WAR OF ANCIENT INDIA

ITS CAUSES, ITS ISSUES, ITS LESSONS

BY

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To

The Honourable Sir James Scorgie Meston, K.C.S.I.,

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR OF THE UNITED PROVINCES OF
AGRA AND OUDH,

WHO COMBINES A RARE INTEREST IN INDIA'S PAST WITH
A RARER SYMPATHY FOR INDIA'S PRESENT AND
A LIVING FAITH IN HER FUTURE.

THIS LITTLE BOOK

BY PERMISSION

RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

PREFACE.



THIS little book is an attempt to present to readers of English a connected narrative of the Great War of ancient India as recorded in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*. Few people in India have not heard of the *Mahabharata*, but a very few indeed, even among Hindus, have read it. Like *Paradise Lost*, this earlier epic is "more admired than read," but for slightly different reasons. Sanskrit has long ceased to be the mother tongue of the Hindus, and has been elevated to the pedestal of a classical language, and the *Mahabharata*, if read at all, is read in vernacular translations. But what goes most against it is its enormous length. No one has time in these days to read a long book merely for pleasure, and condensation and compression, selections and anthologies, have become an absolute necessity. With this view I have made a summary of the leading events of the Great War, and strung them together in the form of a connected story which might prove interesting in these days of another Great War.

The war recorded in the *Mahabharata* was a war in which all the warlike races of Northern India took part, and it was fought probably in the thirteenth or fourteenth century before the Christian era,—though, as a matter of fact, authorities are as little agreed upon the date of the war as upon its historicity. Critics who challenge the historicity of the war are doubtless guided by the parallel story of the Trojan War as told in the *Iliad.* But there is as little reason to doubt the truth of the one as of the other. It is true that history looks rather suspicious when it wears the garb of poetry, but it ought to be remembered that the poetry belongs to an age when poetry was the only form of human utterance for things intended to go down the stream of time. It is true also that many of the events spoken of are clearly fictitious, while many of the characters are as clearly poetic idealizations; but underlying this outer dress there lies the living soul of Truth shining through the varied vestments of poetry and fiction, mythology and romance, which the inspired genius of generations of ambitious writers has draped it with in the course of the centuries that elapsed between the first composition of the poem and the final series of interpolations.

A critical study of the *Mahabharata* is a task that has baffled the sturdiest scholars: everywhere

around us is a region of mist and fog; we have to grope our way doubtfully all along, and come out of the place more befogged than ever. Nothing of the kind has here been even attempted; all that I have aimed at is to tell a plain unvarnished tale of olden times for the ears of such as care to listen to "old unhappy far-off things and battles long ago." Questions of chronology, date of composition, authorship, and such other bibliographical details have been left to the learning of those who make it their business to "master learning's crabbed text." Not that this kind of study is not fruitful; far from it. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to the labours of those learned scholars whose researches have enabled us to know essential facts connected with the story—the site of the battle-field, the date of the war, the exact number of the forces that fought on each side, and so on; but these are matters on which expert opinion is by no means in agreement. And then, to make the confusion worse confounded, the poem itself was tampered with for hundreds of years, during which fresh additions were made to it by successive races of poets, until the epic lost its epic character and became an encyclopœdic repository of a mass of miscellaneous matter, comprising religious doctrines, ethical precepts, didactic tales, romantic stories, traditional maxims, and what not. It is really difficult to conceive any species of booklore

which does not form part of the contents of the *Mahabharata.* The result of these adventitious interpolations is that it is now practically impossible to winnow off the dead husk of imaginative matter from the living grain of authentic narrative. A few centuries after the commencement of the Christian era, an attempt was made to set limits to this continual expansion of the work, and with this view the contents of the Epic were declared in a few prefaratory verses, and the total number of couplets in the whole poem, and in each book separately, was stated. According to this, the aggregate number of couplets in the *Mahabharata* is said to be about ninety thousand, or, as the late Mr. Romesh Chunder Dutt puts it, "about seven times the size of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together."

The kindly reader will now understand why the *Mahabharata* is a sealed book to most of us, even in a translation. A literal English translation of the whole work exists; it was successfully accomplished by a scholar of rare repute, Mr. Pratap Chandra Roy, whose book was published at Calcutta in 1894. This valuable work appears in nine fairly bulky volumes, and the translation conforms to the strictest code of translation ethics. But this literal accuracy, which adds so much to the value of the work as a work of reference, detracts a great deal, I am afraid,

from its readableness. In one sense, one may well say that there is nothing more horrid to read than an Oriental work faithfully translated into English. The modern reader, who takes up one of these translations just to have a taste of ancient Indian literature, is soon compelled to recoil in dread and disgust from the ceaseless strain of following an endless succession of antiquated phrases dealing with things that are as hard for him to visualise as Milton's pictures of Heaven and Chaos. And the difficulty is further enhanced by the confused character of the contents, by the interminable episodes floating through the main narrative and obstructing its current altogether at times; by the dreary discussion of philosophical themes and religious tenets; by veins of intermingling allegory appearing and disappearing without notice or warning; by maxims of jurisprudence and codes of national law; by popular ballads on popular subjects entirely unconnected with the subject of the epic; and by a variety of equally instructive matter cleverly smuggled in by the literary zeal of generations of ambitious bards.

To recover the real events of the epic story from the tangled mass of extraneous matter with which it has got mixed up, is like separating the proverbial grain of truth from the bushel of chaff. What I have done is simply to re-write in plain English

prose the original story of the *Mahabharata*. In the old Brahmanical days such an attempt on the part of a Kshattriya would probably have been deemed a sacrilege; but the truth is that it is precisely because I am a Kshattriya that the tales of old Kshattriya chivalry so strongly fascinated my imagination that I have felt constrained to tell those stories over again in a tongue which will make them readable to the young and the old, the general reader as well as the special student,—that is to say, to every one except the Oriental bibliophile. I can scarcely presume to call my book a translation, unless it be translation in the same sense in which old Bottom in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* was said to be translated. In a word, I have modernised the old story, without stripping off the poetical garb altogether.

The present moment has seemed to me a fit time to bring out my story of the Great War of ancient India, because the present European War has frequently been called the Kurukshettra of Europe. Indeed, the parallel is striking—at least to the Hindu mind. The *Mahabharata* war owed its origin to the jealousy of the Kauravas for their cousins the Pandus; the present War has been caused by the jealousy of the Germans for the greatness and glory of the British Empire. In the eye of reason, to compare the present titanic struggle with the

legendary war of the *Mahabharata* may appear rather queer; but to the eye of faith there is but little difference between the two, so far as the morality of the whole thing is concerned. The story of the *Mahabharata* war is to the millions of Hindu India no mere idle tale: it forms an integral part of their living faith. The minutest detail of each little incident of that sacred narrative is familiar to the mind of even the half-educated Hindu in a manner more vivid than the filmy details of the present War can ever become through the meagre messages flashed by Reuter from day to day. And the reason is clear. The record of the epic war is enshrined in a book which has exercised a deeper influence on Hindu history than any other single book, ancient or modern, has ever done in the case of any other people on earth. And the same book has impressed one great lesson on our minds from age to age,—the truth that Right shall prevail, and Wrong, however seemingly puissant, must in the end be humbled to the dust. And hence it is that the Hindu mind, characteristically calm and philosophic, is altogether unperturbed by the present world-wide conflagration in Europe. That the Right must win, that Truth shall triumph in the long run, that the just cause shall ultimately prove victorious,—these are not lofty doctrines of theoretical ethics to the Hindu, but matters of

incontestable verity, articles of every-day practical faith, believed in by the high and the low, the educated and the uneducated, the old-fashioned and the new-fashioned alike. The utilitarian mind of the West may have need to put forth some effort, some thought-power to grasp the import of such maxims; it may give assent to them, not because it actually feels their force, but because they are generally regarded as "accepted" on all hands. But the Hindu mind, nourished for centuries on the pabulum of unquestioning faith, has no difficulty in perceiving the universality of these doctrines: indeed, the difficulty it feels is to conceive the opposite. And then the Hindu has had the best chance of all people in the world to verify the infallibility of these truths, for no nation has such a long history at their back. The experience of countless generations has only tended to confirm the truth of lessons already driven home by our religious books. Hence the whole Hindu world, pious as well as impious, are agreed on one point, that whatever surprises the present conflict may have to show on the stage, it can end only in one way—the break-up of the German Empire and the glorious triumph of the British.

To understand how this apparently extravagant belief is based on the solid ground of ancient religious faith, it is necessary to follow the following

account of the *Mahabharata* war and to discover the strange parallel between our old friend, Duryodhana, and our new friend, the Kaiser. A vast and growing literature has accumulated round the latter figure; and every writer and speaker who has had a word to say on the present war, has lost no time in saying it. But this particular aspect of the war no writer has yet presented with sufficient detail. Of course, it is the Hindu people alone to whom this aspect is visible, and Hindu writers and speakers have so far contented themselves with enthusiastic expressions of loyalty. This is certainly excellent in itself: it has conveyed a timely assurance to the minds of our rulers that the Hindu people are one with the British Government in their desire to repress the common foe, and that they will stand unto the last and shed their blood cheerfully in fighting the enemies of the Empire who have also proved such ruthless enemies of civilization. It has also served to disillusion the minds of our misguided foes who were led to believe that India was in a state of seething unrest. They have now learned that India has sent out her sons in hundreds and in thousands to foreign shores to cut the throats of those very foes who hoped to be welcomed by them. A strong wave of patriotism has swept the country from one end to the other—a patriotism based on ideas of the most enlightened

selfinterest, commingled with feelings of the most disinterested affection. But the views expressed by platform speakers and press-writers may be said to represent the views of the educated classes alone; and though these are undoubtedly the leaders of public thought, they nevertheless constitute a small percentage of the population. It may be of interest to know how the bulk of the Hindus—the uneducated and the ill-educated classes—look upon the present war, and this is what the present book purposes to do.

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CHAPTER I

The Jealousy of Cousins

In the remotest ages of the world there lived in Northern India a Kshattriya raja, named Santanu, an illustrious descendant of the famous King Bharat, son of the still more famous Sakuntala. This king nobly upheld the great traditions of his dynasty. His love and zeal for the moral and social welfare of his subjects had endeared him to the hearts of his people. His friends adored him as a god, his enemies dreaded him as a demon. His life was simple, his court was pure, his kingdom powerful and flourishing.

Peace and security, which are the prime condition of national existence, and trade and commerce, which constitute the mainspring of national wealth, were both keenly watched by the ruler. Complete toleration in matters of religion, perfect liberty in matters of thought and theory, absolute freedom in matters of social form and usage, these were the common inheritance of the people throughout the length and breadth of this happy state. Misrule, tyranny, and injustice were

absolutely unknown. The people were loyal and loving, and considered themselves blessed in being ruled by such a model ruler.

After living to a ripe old age, king Santanu died, leaving behind him his heir-apparent, Vichitra-Virjà, to succeed him. This king had two sons, Dhritarashtra and Pandu. At his untimely death, the question of succession became a difficult problem, because the eldest prince, Dhritarashtra, was born blind, and so his second brother, Pandu, was called to the throne.

Shortly after his succession, Pandu resolved to go into some pathless forest and to pass his life in retirement. He did not, however, disclose his intention to anyone, being afraid of public disapprobation; but he kept turning over this resolve seriously in his mind. At last his heart grew sick of the din and clamour that besets an oriental throne, and, taking his queen with him, he started for the jungle. In course of time the king died at his hermitage, leaving behind five sons—Yudhishtira, distinguished for his truth and piety; Bhima, dreaded for his superhuman strength; Arjuna, renowned for his skill in arms; and Nakula and Sahadeva, who were twins. When the news of the pious Pandu's death at his hermitage reached the capital, the whole country mourned for him as one man. The people wept as though they had

lost a dear relative. The young Pandu princes and the widowed queen, their mother, were brought to Hastinapur to dwell in the palace of Dhritarashtra and to be brought up along with his own sons.

When the young princes grew to manhood, their tall stature, broad chest, well-proportioned limbs, majestic gait, and dignified manners made the people entertain high hopes of them. The popularity of their pious father descended to them in full ; but this popularity made their cousin Duryodhana, and the other sons of Dhritarashtra, exceedingly jealous.

The five Pandu brothers were trained in the use of arms, and they took part in all warlike exercises with the keenest interest and ardour. Their preceptor was a noble Brahman, named Drona Acharya, a pious and high-souled sage who was entrusted with the military education of all the princes of the royal household, who received regular lessons in archery, chariot-driving, sword-fighting, lance-throwing, wrestling, and such other practices as formed part of a Kshattriya's training in those days. Drona had, however, made one stipulation with Bhishma (uncle of king Dhritarashtra who ruled the state as regent), that when the young princes were fully trained in the art of war, they should assist him in fighting against his enemy Drupada King of Panchala.

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Drona soon grew very fond of his Pandava pupils, and especially of Arjuna, who surpassed all his brothers and cousins in warlike skill, and yet was the most modest and the most obedient of them all. This made Duryodhana all the more jealous of the Pandu brothers, who all excelled him in feats of arms, and he was particularly envious of Arjuna's undisputed superiority over the rest.

Now when the princes had completed their course of military training, a tournament was held at which the youthful warriors displayed their skill at arms amid showers of applause from the spectators crowding round the ring. But ere long the contest waxed warmer than mere mimic fury. Proud Duryodhana had selected the powerful Bhima for his antagonist, and the two combatants soon began to grapple in right earnest, until it became clear that each thirsted for the other's blood. The two cousins were then forcibly parted by command of the king and their preceptor Drona. Later on in the course of the day, an unknown warrior of obscure origin, named Karna, appeared on the scene, and proved himself a fit match against the bravest of the Pandavas, Arjuna. This was enough to make him a favourite of Duryodhana, who took him away to his own palace and heaped favours upon him.

The tournament served only to foment the jealousy of Duryodhana for the Pandu princes, and the

hospitality dealt out to the plebeian Karna further added fuel to the fire.

Every day a new trouble brewed and passed over the head of the fatherless princes. They had to suffer every kind of indignity, and were treated no better than cats and dogs, both at home and in the public streets. Dhritarashtra discovered the evil designs of Duryodhana, and with a politician's tact, he shifted their abode to Varanavata. Even then the envious Duryodhana did not let them live in peace. He ordered a handsome palace to be constructed of wax, resin, and other inflammable materials, skilfully plastered over so as to look like brick and stone; and this was done in furtherance of a dark scheme to exterminate them. But a well-wisher of theirs—the wise Vidura—warned them of the danger in good time. When the treacherous structure was complete, the Pandu brothers were asked to reside in it, on the plea that the royal palace was insufficient to accommodate the additional inmates.

The fatal moment came. It was a drear dark night, and to thicken the darkness, a dense fog was hiding everything in its sable shroud. The city was hushed in sleep; not a footstep sounded on the pavements; suddenly the whole edifice blazed up in a mighty conflagration, and in a few moments was reduced to a heap of ashes. The princes had

been forewarned, and could make their escape through a subterranean passage, undetected by the dastardly Duryodhana, who probably chuckled in the thought that he had accomplished the destruction of his detestable foes. Like another infamous king of antiquity, he played on the fiddle as the fire flamed and crackled.

This shocking conspiracy left no doubt in the mind of the public that Duryodhana was at the bottom of the crime, that Duryodhana had contemplated a gruesome tragedy to secure the throne for himself, to the exclusion of the eldest Pandava prince, Yudhishtira. Duryodhana had preserved rigid secrecy in working out the plot,—but secrets will leak out, even when they are lodged within a royal breast. The tongue of rumour first whispered, and then clanged, and in a few days the matter became common property. The night of the catastrophe was, as has been remarked, horribly ugly, and as it wore on, it began to rain in torrents; but the five youthful princes, accompanied by their mother, were plodding their path pitifully, wrapped against the dripping sky in a mantle of deep thought. At times they sat down on the wayside, at others resumed their homeless march. They forded the Ganges, struggling their way across inch by inch, now nearly swept off their legs by some fatal swirl or eddy, now narrowly escaping a watery grave,

but at last safely landed on the opposite bank. But still there was no shelter for them. They toiled on mile after mile of weary country, until their mother felt her throat parched with thirst, and the poor lady laid herself down heavily on the ground. Bhima started in search of water; but he had no vessel to bring it in; so he got his turban well soaked in water, and quickly brought it to his dying mother, and wrung it out, and dropped the moisture on her lips just in time to save her life. But a wet turban could scarcely sustain the whole weary band on their toilsome journey; the calls of hunger became just as insistent as the pangs of thirst; and, unable to bear on, the party sat down under the shade of an umbrageous tree, beneath whose hospitable branches they quartered for the rest of the day.

But Bhima had no rest either of mind or of body. "Ah!" he muttered to himself, "who can override the decrees of fate? O the sad plight into which my brothers have fallen! How it spurs my spirit to fury! What more surprises has the Evil One in store for us? Yudhishtira, the rightful heir to the throne, is lying on the hard bare ground, while Duryodhana, the base usurper, is reposing on the couch of luxury, surrounded by every emblem of pomp and power! My brother is of a most forgiving disposition, otherwise, O Duryodhana, where wouldst thou have been to-day?"

CHAPTER II.

The Wedding Assembly of Draupadi.

It needs some effort of the imagination to conceive what a fearful night the weary exiles must have passed. However, the morning light restored their spirits, and they wandered doubtfully through the forest, wondering what strange turns of fortune were to overtake them yet. Afraid of being recognised and pursued, they put off their royal robes, and besmeared their bodies with ashes to pass off for holy hermits. Their mother similarly had to assume the disguise of a humble woman. The ways of destiny are indeed wonderful!

One day, in the course of their wanderings they came across a group of Brahmans, who told them that they were going to the *Swayamvara* (wedding assembly) of the Raja of Panchala's daughter. The Brahmans also told them that the spectacle would be on a scale of magnificence such as human eyes had seldom beheld. The Pandava princes prepared to go to Panchala, impelled more by the sad necessity of concealment than by any idle curiosity to witness the spectacle.

Coming to Panchala, the Pandava brothers were once more in the country of that gallant foe against whom they had lately waged war at the behest of their preceptor Drona. But Drona had forgiven his enemy, and had spared his life and restored his territories. Ever since the Panchala monarch, Drupada, had seen the Pandavas' prowess in battle, his heart had longed to bestow his daughter on the most gallant of them—Arjuna. He had never revealed this wish to any one, for the choice really lay not with him, but with his daughter, Draupadi. But to fulfil this wish he had set up a condition for his daughter's marriage which none but Arjuna could fulfil. He constructed a mighty bow, and erected a lofty pole surmounted by a golden fish, which was delicately poised above a swiftly-revolving disc. And the condition was that the suitor must bend the bow, and shoot an arrow through the revolving disc so as to strike the fish in the eye and bring it down. Only five arrows were allowed to each competitor, so that only a most skilful archer like Arjuna could hit the target.

For the Swayamvara, a large field had been cleared and dotted over by a cluster of milk-white pavilions ornamented with mimic minarets, and resplendent with the glow of gold and gems. For over two weeks before the date of the auspicious event there was feasting and merry-making in the royal

hall. On the appointed day, the princely suitors were ushered into the gaily-decorated amphitheatre and seated in a semicircle, in front of the throne of king Draupada, while an enormous crowd of spectators were thronging the entrance, and standing round the barriers, and perching on the branches of trees, to witness the splendid ceremony.

When all was ready, Princess Draupadi stepped gently into the assembly, bearing in her hand the bridal garland which was to set the seal on her choice of a husband.

Among the princes gathered at the Swayamvara, were Duryodhana, Karna, the five Pandavas, Krishna, his brother Balarama, the Jadava princes, the Raja of Sindhu and his sons, the Raja of Chedi, the king of Kosala, the Raja of Madra, and many others. The five Pandavas were, however, not seated among the nobility, but among the Brahmans, who formed a group apart; for they were disguised as priests still. All eyes were fixed on Draupadi, and there was perfect silence in the crowded assembly as Dhrishta-dyumna, brother of Draupadi, made the customary proclamation :—

" Here stands the peerless princess Draupadi. Whosoever will bend this bow and shoot an arrow at the eye of yonder fish, through the revolving disc, shall, if he is of noble blood, have her as his bride."

Having made the above proclamation, the prince

recited to his sister the names of the royal suitors, their lineage and their exploits; and then asked her to put the garland round the neck of the prince who should succeed in shooting the target.

Then began the contest in archery. Many a prince thought himself already beaten, as he looked at the dreaded bow and the elusive target. Raja after raja made his trial, and raja after raja went back to his seat in sullen disappointment. Warriors renowned for their valour and strength trembled like an autumn leaf as they walked towards the mighty bow, and like an autumn leaf they dropped faded and colourless on the ground, exhausted by the stress and the strain of bending the formidable bow. Others stepped up with better courage, but came back with no better fortune.

The failed candidates consoled themseves with a grim smile or a scornful laugh each time a competitor offered himself for the trial or came back to his seat disappointed. At length the valiant Karna strode up to the great bow, and bent it and strung it, to the horror of king Drupada and his son, who were alarmed lest Karna, of obscure origin, should succeed also in piercing the target. But before he had time to try the target, Draupadi declared her will, expressing her disdain for the son of a charioteer, and Karna cast down the bow and walked away crest-fallen.

Many others made the trial after Karna, but strained their nerves in vain. Some rolled down exhausted on the ground amid roars of laughter from the spectators, who keenly appreciated each comic element of the show.

Meanwhile, the Pandava brothers sat apart among the priestly class, looking on, as though unconcerned in the event of the day. Suddenly a youthful figure stepped out into the centre of the theatre from among the priestly group; and a secret titter went round the place,—for what could a bookish priest do against doughty warriors born to arms?

Hence some of the Brahmans dissuaded the young man from making the attempt; others said that a Brahman was up to any feat, of brains or arms; others again looked on in mute wonder. The tall youth meanwhile strode forward, and flinging off his deerskin garment, bared his broad shoulders and ample chest. He then walked round the bow, and addressed a silent prayer, while all eyes gazed intently upon him, as with a supreme effort he bent the great bow and fastened the string to it amid loud plaudits pealing from the barriers. But there was a harder trial yet to be undergone—that of hitting the evasive target. Lifting up the bow, and adjusting an arrow to its cord, he took aim, and with a graceful bending of one knee he shot

the hissing arrow right into the eye of the golden fish, and brought it down to the ground, while a thunder of applause roared through the multitude standing round the lists. For, to the multitude it mattered not who the winner was, as long as they had the pleasure of watching a contest, the issue of which hung in the balance. But the bosom of Draupadi heaved and fell each time a turbaned chief or plumed potentate advanced up to the target and retreated to his seat; for to her the golden fish hanging above the wheel was the emblem of her own fate hanging by a thin thread. But now her heart was at ease. From the very first she had felt herself drawn to the skin-clad youth standing apart from the purple-clad rajas, and, though she had never expected the young man to enter the contest, her heart had been wishing him joy all the time he stood in the middle of the ring making his trial. And now her heart's wish had been realised; she smiled in joy; and, lightly stepping up to the victor, she flung the bridal garland round his neck.

The sight of the bridal garland reawakened the jealousy and mortification of the disappointed suitors, who hung down their heads in shame and confusion. They then held a consultation, and decided to put the nameless victor to death. They could not bear the sight of a common street beggar,

as they thought, winning the hand of a Kshattriya princess. Their honour had been stained, their birthright trespassed upon. They determined also to seize Draupadi, because she had the hardihood to honour a beggarly Brahman and insult her own father and a host of his noble friends.

Shouting with anger the rajas poured from the galleries and rushed with drawn swords towards the victorious suitor. A free fight ensued ; the wedding assembly soon became an aceldama ; and princes who had come in hopes of winning the fair Draupadi, lay rolling on the ground, clasped in the embrace of death. Karna kept up the contest for a long while, and stood successfully against the all-conquering Brahman, upon whom he fell with whirlwind fury again and again, piercing the priestly limbs with many a well-aimed dart. Draupadi was in an agony of grief, and was inwardly cursing her fatal dower of beauty which had been the cause of so much fighting and bloodshed. But she consoled herself with the thought that she was innocent and that her gallant winner's life was safe. For Karna had now given up the contest as hopeless, and was trying to take out a confession from the victorious champion as to who he really was. "Art thou truly," asked Karna, "a Brahman born? But thy condition and thy courage show thee to be above what thou appearest. No Brahman,

except Parasurama, who is said to have slain all the Kshattriyas of the world, can ever hold his own against a Kshattriya. A mean mendicant, who begs his bread from door to door, cannot be a master of the art of combat. Indeed, no warrior could have fought so well, except Arjuna: Arjuna alone of living mortals can match me,—none else."

The Brahman only smiled in reply, and turned to depart, and Draupadi meekly followed the footsteps of her own chosen lord.

CHAPTER III.

The Marriage of Draupadi.

A poor woman, lodging in a potter's hut, was impatiently waiting for the return of her sons who had gone to see the celebration of Draupadi's Swayamvara. They had overstayed, or were believed by their mother to have overstayed; and the poor woman was accordingly very anxious. She feared some fresh calamity had overtaken her sons in the stranger's land. Just then, however, she heard footsteps hastening to the door, and the next moment in burst her five stalwart sons, leading a handsome princess by the hand, gracefully wrapped in rich garments and decked with the fairest jewels. A thrill of joy passed through her aged limbs, as her eyes fell upon the lovely princess, and in a flash the whole truth dawned upon her mind. The mother and sons at once fell into conversation, and the youths gave her a lively account of the lucky adventure they had passed through that day.

Now we leave them there, and turn our steps towards the royal palace to see what is going on there.

Raja Drupada, King of Panchala, was sitting alone in his chamber, bemoaning his fate, and spurning at every one who approached him. Suddenly his son entered the room with a smile upon his lips. The Raja first frowned at him, and then softening a little exclaimed: "Where is my daughter? Who has won her? O my daughter!" He spoke in a voice shaking with passion, and then after a pause, spoke again:

"O my daughter! Thou shalt henceforth have to beg thy bread from door to door. Alms and charity shall be thy marriage portion, a begging bowl thy queenly crown! Alas! how shall I bear to look upon thee with a wallet swinging at thy shoulder? What sins have I committed in my past life to merit this humiliation? Alas! I cannot shake off this torturing thought, try howsoever I may. I feel I am undone! How can I repair what is irreparable, or remedy aught that hath passed the stage of remedy? It had been my fondest desire that Draupadi should be given in marriage to Arjuna, but the Almighty hath willed otherwise. I know but too well that my weeping and wailing is of no avail; but was sorrow ever consoled by such puerile philosophy? This blow shall be my death-blow!"

"Dispel these disconcerting thoughts from your mind, good father," cried Dhrishta-dyumna in a

cheerful voice; "she *has* indeed been won by Arjuna."

"Is it true?" broke in the Raja hastily, and his tearful eyes glistened with joy once more as he asked, "How did you come to know this? Be brief. Tell me all in a word."

The prince replied, "As soon as the Brahman made his way home with my sister, I followed his steps unobserved; and when they reached their lodgings, I leaned my ear against the door, and in relating this incident to his mother, the true fact was disclosed. I thus found out that the little group of Brahmans in deerskin were the five Pandava princes in disguise. Poor souls, they have suffered every kind of pain and privation at the hands of Duryodhana, who lately schemed to burn them alive by setting fire to a house constructed of inflammable materials, in which they were made to reside by Duryodhana himself. Fortunately they escaped through a subterranean passage, and wandering their way, they came to Panchala in the company of a group of priests bound hither."

The King was now completely relieved of his anxiety, and a heavy weight was lifted from off his heart. "Tell my ministers," said he, "to obtain authentic information"

A deputation of state officials was accordingly sent to the potter's house. With courtly courtesy

they bowed to the Pandava brothers, and one of them, as spokesman, said to the winner of Draupadi, "We have come to offer you our congratulations on your success. Your brilliant feat of to-day's shall be sung by bards and recorded by historians and remembered by the people. When the greatest Rajas and Maharajas failed to hit the target, our monarch was sorely disappointed, and the thought of the princess doomed to perpetual maidenhood was causing the deepest despair in his sorrowing heart. But we are under the greatest obligation to you, for you have cleared off the clouds of anxiety that hung upon his heart. Of course, his secret wish was—I suppose there is no breach of confidence in talking of the secret now—that the world-renowned Arjuna should wed the lovely princess; nevertheless, he is satisfied that his daughter is no longer an unmarried maiden. He is, however, anxious now to know details of birth, country, &c., regarding the gallant winner of his daughter's hand."

The eldest of the brothers took upon himself to give a reply to the deputation. He said, "The conditions of the marriage as proclaimed by your noble prince are as well-known to you as to me. The trial was open to all comers; and those conditions have been fairly and fully fulfilled by this gentleman, and consequently your princess is married to him for better for worse."

The courtiers looked disappointed, and Yudhishtira, unwilling to keep them in suspense any longer, proceeded: "However, so much is undeniable that Arjuna is a matchless warrior, and it is equally undeniable that Arjuna and no other has won your noble princess. Let me in turn offer my own congratulations to your King on the singular success of his long-cherished hope."

At these words the courtiers abruptly stood up, and making a low bow, asked for leave to depart. Their object was now gained: they had fished out the secret they had been commissioned to discover, and they joyfully came back to the royal palace and reported their success to the King.

Then there were rejoicings in the palace of Raja Drupada, who invited the Pandava brothers to a ceremonious reception in his audience-hall, at which he tenderly embraced his son-in-law and the latter's brothers one after another, and assured them of the best friendship and protection of his house.

The marriage of Draupadi was then celebrated with befitting pomp and splendour. Every form of rejoicing that imagination could devise or heart desire was held in celebration of the Princess' happy nuptials. The Pandavas threw off their Brahmanical disguise, and began henceforth to live under the protection of their powerful ally, the Raja of Panchala.

CHAPTER IV.

The Council Chamber.

Draupadi was married, and the Pandava brothers began to live under the protection of the king of Panchala. Such a protection was most needful to them: they could no longer wander in disguise, for Duryodhana himself had seen them and recognised them, and known that they were still alive. Rude must have been his shock of surprise to see the Pandava brothers still in the land of the living, and, worse than all, to see Arjuna triumphantly winning the hand of the fair Panchala princess. His jealous wrath knew no bounds to see his hated kinsmen, whom he had plotted to burn alive, having made a powerful alliance with Drupada, who had himself never been a particular friend of Duryodhana's.

A great council was held. Dhritarashtra was sitting on his throne, and his courtiers were standing round him, encircling him like a galaxy of stars. All was silence for a while, and then the king stood up and spoke :—

" Worthy and trusted councillors,—Ye are the

pillars of the state; upon you depends the stability of my kingdom, and the prosperity and happiness of my people. Your loyalty to the throne is unquestioned, and your love for me untarnished by base alloy. I have summoned you to this council to deliberate over a problem of which my unaided judgment has failed to offer a satisfactory solution. Let your better wisdom solve it for me, and afford me one more proof of your loyalty and devotion to my throne and to my person. You know that the Pandavas have formed an alliance with my enemy, Raja Drupada—an alliance fraught with the gravest possibilities: what steps should be taken to keep the foe out of harm's way?"

Duryodhana immediately stood up to offer a solution: "My suggestion is, let Drupada's ministers be bribed, and disaffection created among them. That is one plan. I have another scheme in my mind, which is likely to be more effective than the former, and that is, let the princess Draupadi be accused of some unspeakable, unpardonable wrong. This will excite the wrath of the Pandavas, who will then cast her away, and thus the alliance between them and the king of Panchala will be dissolved automatically. Then the only thing left to do would be to poison the giant Bhima, and there would be an end to all our difficulty."

Duryodhana sat down, and Karna rose up to

speak :—" Your Majesty must pardon me for not holding the same opinion as our beloved Prince. To my mind the only remedy lies in our strong arms. Let an expedition move as quickly as possible against Raja Drupada, and I am sure his contemptible little army can offer but poor resistance. But this ought to be done before their friend, Krishna, Raja of Gujarat, has time to come to their help."

Dhritarashtra next asked the aged Bhishma what advice his ripe wisdom had to offer. Bhishma said : "Since I am called upon to speak out my mind, I am constrained to utter some unpalatable truths. I do believe that by the right of birth, Yudhishtira is the lawful heir to the throne. If you are not prepared to relinquish the crown completely, you ought to grant him half the territories. Justice and truth alike demand this. If you misappropriate his lawful portion, I predict then the downfall of your kingdom is at hand. Inordinate avarice brings about the destruction of family and state alike. This truth is supported by the recorded experience of all mankind. The report of your son's most treacherous act to burn his own cousins alive is spreading beyond the limits of your dominions, and Duryodhana is branded as a would-be murderer by every tongue, both at home and abroad."

Karna stood up a second time to comment upon Bhishma's speech. He said, " Bhishma's mind is prejudiced ; Bhishma's eyes are blind to reason ; Bhishma's judgment is perverted ; Bhishma is suffering from some mental malady that darkens and discolours his mental vision. It is the bounden duty of a councillor to approach every question cool-mindedly. More than once have words uttered unguardedly by a careless councillor proved the bane of empires."

Dronacharya interrupted Karna by saying, "Cease; O Karna, hold thy wagging tongue. Wilt thou take no rest until thou hast seen this kingly house go to rack and ruin ? "

Vidura stood up to oppose Duryodhana's proposal in the same strain as the last speaker had done : " I am constrained by my duty to speak out the truth as I feel it, regardless of consequences : that if this state of things will unhappily continue, the very name of this princely house will be wiped off. My only wish, therefore, is that these family dissensions should be amicably settled in any manner consistent with reason."

The debate now ended, and Dhritarashtra announced his royal decision to recall the Pandava exiles, and to make over to them their fair share of the kingdom of Hastinapur. Messengers were accordingly despatched to Panchala to bring back

Yudhishtira and his brothers. When these envoys reached Panchala they found the Pandavas sitting in the audience chamber, chatting gaily with Drupada.

"Your case, Yudhishtira," said Raja Drupada sorrowfully, "has no parallel in the history of the world. What a pity it is that your own brethren should have turned out to be your worst enemies."

"Fie upon wealth and power!" said Yudhishtira, "how they set brother against brother, the son against his own father! Worth, wealth, and woman have ever been the three most subtle agents of destruction among men."

"I solemnly promise," ejaculated Drupada, with a crimson spot rising to his cheeks, "I do hereby declare that if you will not get your rightful share in the kingdom peacefully, I will win it for you at the point of the sword."

Just at this moment the ambassadors of Dhritarashtra were ushered into the royal presence, and reverentially kissing the ground before the throne, they submitted:—"We have been commanded by our august lord and sovereign to deliver the joyful tidings of our monarch's hearty approbation of the alliance between the two royal houses of Pandu and Panchala. But His Majesty is seized with a strong desire to nestle his dear nephews in his bosom, and Her Majesty the Queen is filled

with a tender longing to see the face of the royal bride. The whole country is ready as one man to welcome them."

Raja Drupada was not at all pleased with the idea of their return to Hastinapur, nor did he, on the contrary, think it advisable to stop them from going. At length he felt obliged to yield his consent, and the Pandus, accompanied by their mother and the princess Draupadi, started for Hastinapur. They were escorted by a company of soldiers and a crowd of slaves, and the whole party formed a brilliant cavalcade marching to the sound of music and drums.

When the party reached Hastinapur, the lords of the state were assembled at the city gate to give them a royal reception. The people of the city were longing for the return of their favorite princes, and as the salutes of guns announced that they had entered the city bounds, the rejoicings of the people became unrestrained; the crowds of men, women and children that had come out to see them appeared to have been seized with a delirious frenzy. The streets were decorated with flags and buntings and triumphal arches emblazoned with appropriate devices and mottoes of welcome. As the princes entered the royal hall of state, Dhritarashtra himself stepped down from the throne, and embraced his nephews one after another, and the princes then

fell down at their uncle's feet and received his blessings.

Similarly, the Queen and the ladies of the royal household ran forward to welcome Draupadi, who advanced and touched Her Majesty's feet by way of reverential salutation. The impression she produced on the minds of her female relations was exceedingly favourable. Her charming beauty, and natural grace and simplicity of manners seemed to draw everybody to her with love and admiration.

A reconciliation between the parted cousins was thus effected, and king Dhritarashtra's kindly words made up the breach between them, at least so far as the Pandavas were concerned. Addressing Yudhishtira he said, "All feud between you and us is now a matter of the past. Henceforth may firm friendship unite the two collateral houses of Kuru and Pandu. Half of my dominions do I grant unto you, and you may set up a new capital of your own at Khanduprasth or elsewhere, and rule over your territories in peace and glory."

The kingdom of Hastinapur was accordingly parcelled in two, Duryodhana retaining the eastern provinces, which were rich and fertile, Yudhishtira obtaining the western portion, which was mostly desert or forest.

CHAPTER V.

The New Kingdom of Indraprastha.

The Pandu princes soon removed to their new capital of Khanduprastha, and set themselves to the task of laying the foundations of a new kingdom. The country was cleared of jungle; desert lands were irrigated; barren tracts brought under the plough. A new palace was designed and constructed for the residence of the new king—a palace royal in fact, royal in name, royal in look. Beholders were struck with the beauty and splendour of this wonderful edifice. Towering above the banks of the blue-watered Jumna, it appeared as though it were a fairy structure raised by fairy hands from out the rippling waves that washed its marble bases day and night. The garden enclosing the palace was fully in keeping with the beauty and dignity of the building. It was richly stocked with fruit trees, and with flowers and ornamental shrubbery; a network of brooks and streams, cut from the river, flowed through and round the garden; herds of horned antlers grazed on its sweeping lawns; swarms of crested peacocks roamed

through the glades or perched on the low-hanging branches of trees; fountains played inside its glimmering bowers, and *kokils* sang in its leafy thickets. Every aid that art could bestow on Nature, every feature of Nature's beauty that art could borrow or reproduce, was there to enchain the sense and charm the soul. When the new palace was ready, the Pandava brothers made a ceremonious entry into it, and gave it the name of Indraprastha, in allusion to its Elysian beauty.

Yudhishtira was then formally installed on the throne as king of Indraprastha. Under his benign rule, the country grew rich and prosperous, and the people were contented and happy. Little by little he extended the bounds of his sway, until the kingdom of Indraprastha outgrew the parent state, not only in extent of territory, but also in power and political influence. When Yudhishtira thought he had thoroughly consolidated his rule, he was seized with a desire to perform the *Rajasuya yajna* (an imperial sacrifice), as a token of his formal assumption of imperial rule over the petty kingships in his neighbourhood. He accordingly sent his four brothers to all the neighbouring potentates to proclaim his supremacy over them. The chiefs who acknowledged his supremacy were in return offered peace and protection as his trusty vassals, and were invited to take part in the imperial

sacrifice; while those who refused or resented or resisted were put to the sword, their territories being annexed to the kingdom of Indraprastha.

The *Rajasuya* ceremony was a great political success. It established Yudhishtira securely on his throne; it extended his sway over a number of petty princedoms; it brought him into friendship and alliance with the other powerful kingdoms of Northern India; and it spread the terror and glory of his name far and wide.

Shortly after the celebration of the great sacrificial rite, Duryodhana, accompanied by his maternal uncle, Shakuni, paid a visit to Indraprastha, more out of feelings of jealousy than motives of affection. Whatever he saw, whatever he heard, whatever he inferred, merely served to inflame his jealousy and wrath. The smiling face of the country, the happy looks of the people, the display of wealth and luxury everywhere about the royal palace, and above all, the beauty and splendour of the royal palace itself, were more than Duryodhana's flesh and blood could bear. With a pretence of lively interest he went over every part of the great building. In one place he dashed his head against a wall in trying to pass through what looked like a glazed door; in another, as he was passing from one stately hall to another, he had his rich robes wetted by a sudden spray of perfume

that showered from a mysterious fountain in the ceiling; in another place again, Duryodhana took off his clothes with intent to bathe in what seemed to be a crystal brook, but in trying to plunge into the seeming waters he fell flat on the glassy pavement of what was really an architectural illusion. Of course, there was no intention on the part of the Pandavas to lay a trap for him, or to befool him; but Duryodhana in his crooked heart took each of these innocent incidents as the outcome of a deliberate plan to put him to shame, especially since each was followed by a little harmless raillery among the Pandu brothers. Duryodhana took away a deep grudge in his heart for the abashment he thought he had suffered at the hands of his conceited cousins, and his malice was already meditating revenge. He left Indraprastha as speedily as he could, and on the way home disburdened his heart to his maternal uncle thus:

"Shakuni," said he, "I feel a poison pulsating through my heart. What ingenious devices the impudent Pandus had prepared to entrap me! By heavens, their sole motive was to insult me. Insult in place of brotherly hospitality,—insult which is more galling than wormwood! Insult deliberate and downright! That was why those fellows followed me like a pack of dogs wherever I went—in order to enjoy the gratifying sight of

seeing me trip and tumble before their eyes. And the tumble too—it was as bad as a nasty fall: it has left some blue bruises on my limbs! My father's mind is worn out with care and age, and he is quite incapable now of disentangling knotty problems. He depends helplessly upon the advice of his counsellors—counsellors as fit to be trusted as adders fanged. Well, these traitors of his advised him to give them half of our dominions, to which the Pandus had no earthly claim at all. His imbecile Majesty will, I am constrained to say, find himself a homeless exile one day, and he will then repent, too late, for having nourished a brood of snakes. You have seen with your own eyes how our faithless ministers have filled the house of Pandu with wealth plundered from our own treasury. I am not a woman to whine in weak inactivity: I will fight and die! O that I could slay those traitors first, and then I would be content to die. I must confess that our army, powerful as it is, is too weak for an open encounter with our foes, especially since they are sure to be aided and abetted by numerous strong allies. Their splendour and magnificence were an eyesore to me: I prefer death to living a dishonourable life, even though I should live the age of a raven."

Shakuni patiently listened to this royal rigmarole,

and spoke not a word in reply until Duryodhana had finished. As a time-serving courtier, he had trained himself in the art of an attentive listener, and knew the skilful way of giving intelligent assent to princes' proposals. And now seeing Duryodhana's mind so embittered against his cousins, he thought it a fit opportunity of adding to the bitterness by imparting to it some of the venom of his own heart.

"Your Royal Highness is quite right," said he, "in saying that it is a most difficult task to overthrow the power of the faithless Pandu, whose supremacy is acknowledged by a host of chiefs and kings. But at the same time Your Highness is quite wrong in saying that it is better to die than to live in dishonour. Dishonour, my Lord, is more often a matter of fancy than fact; at best, it is like a cut that is soon healed. An idea has just struck me; let me impart it to you before it vanishes from my mind. I think it is a scheme that is sure to catch. Yudhishtira's love for playing at dice is well-known, and you know, too, how skilful I myself am at the game. The Pandu is still a novice at it, and I can easily beat him with the help of my thousand tricks. I shall play with loaded dice, and incite him to put heavy stakes, and in half-a-dozen throws I warrant to humble down his pride. I shall win everything he owns, and turn him into

a street beggar And when he is reduced to that, I shall bind him down to harder terms by stipulating that the loser shall go into exile for twelve years. It is only by secret guile, not by open war, that we can accomplish the destruction of our foes."

CHAPTER VI.

The Great Gambling Match.

A complete conspiracy was now ready, and with this in his head, Duryodhana entered the palace at Hastinapur, and fell down at the feet of the blind old king, his father, in a storm of tears. The fond father was much grieved to see his son in tears, and with a father's solicitude asked what had happened.

"Father," replied Duryodhana, "the upstart splendour of Yudhishtira's court outshines the ancient glory of Hastinapur. His coffers are overflowing with gold and gems; his provinces are brimming over with prosperity; his palace is a paradise on earth. We have been totally eclipsed by a rival whom we ourselves set up. Ah, king! I am sick at heart and long for death. Indeed, I should not have lived to speak this unto you, but Shakuni, my loving uncle, has somewhat delivered me from my pain. He has put forward a capital scheme to vanquish our rival, and it is this,—that I should invite Yudhishtira to a gambling match, in which we shall manage matters so that he will lose throw

after throw, stake after stake, until I recover all that I have lost—I mean the half of the kingdom that your royal generosity has bestowed upon him. If, however, the chances turn against me,—well, even with that contingency I am content. Let him be sole monarch in my place, or let me alone rule over an undivided empire, but as for both, two stars cannot keep motion in one sphere."

"My dear son," replied Dhritarashtra, "your tears are prompted by anger, and anger is but a brief madness. Why do you suffer your heart to be consumed by the fire of wrath? Why have you made a plot to torment your poor cousins again? They have had enough of pain already: let them live in peace for a while. To court the hostility of the powerful is to waken a sleeping lion. And the gambling! Utter not the name before me—I hate the very sound of its name. It only spells ruin and disaster. I shudder to think of allowing you to play this fatal game. Ask Vidura what he has to say to this."

Vidura, without waiting to be questioned, stood up to give expression to his views. Addressing the throne, he said, "You know, my Lord, I have never been a flatterer. On the contrary, my trenchant remarks have often recoiled heavily upon my own head. On this occasion, too, I must frankly give it out as my opinion that our Prince's greed to grab

his cousin's riches, will only end in his own ruin. His scheme is fraught with the direst consequences, against which I feel it my duty to warn Your Majesty."

The unwillingness of the king and the opposition of Vidura served only to sharpen Duryodhana's jealousy and to strengthen his headstrong obstinacy. Now, Yudhishtira, with all his noble virtues, had one outstanding weakness—love of dice. It was a temptation which his stoic heart was unable to resist, from whatever quarter it might come. So, when he was invited by Duryodhana to play a gambling match, he thought it a point of honour to accept the challenge. He came all the way from Indraprastha to play the match, and brought not only all his brothers, but his aged mother as well as the young Draupadi with him.

The gambling match began. At the first throw Yudhishtira lost the stake; indeed, he lost at every throw on that unlucky day. Next day he played again, and lost again, each succeeding loss only whetting his appetite for the game. Gold, jewels, horses, chariots, elephants, were one by one staked and lost, passing away from his grasp like fairy gold. He then staked his royal treasury, and then his empire, and these too went the same way. But still his passion for the game showed no signs of abatement. He staked his brothers, he staked

himself, and, lastly, to the shame and horror of all present, staked Draupadi, and lost each and all. Bhishma, Drona, and Vidura watched the game with fainting hearts and sinking spirits, while Karna and Duhsasana and the other conspirators were chuckling in triumph.

The last stake lost and won was Draupadi, and Duryodhana commanded Vidura to go and bring her into the council-chamber; for, he said, she was no longer a queen, but a bondwoman. Vidura replied, "Don't drive the Pandavas to desperation. To bring Draupadi here would be an outrage upon her modesty—an outrage that will move even the stones of Indraprastha to rage and mutiny."

Duryodhana cursed Vidura, and ordered one of his attendants to summon Draupadi, and the good Vidura could not help saying to himself with a sigh, "Duryodhana has lost what little reason he had. Dishonesty is one of the gates to hell, and through that gate Duryodhana means to pass."

Draupadi was sitting in her chamber when Duryodhana's menial stealthily entered the door, and delivered his master's message to her. Draupadi was astounded, but quickly regaining her presence of mind, she said to the messenger, "Have I heard thee, menial, aright? Has my noble husband said so unto thee? Has the king lost his reason in

losing the game? Had he nothing else to stake that he staked his queen?"

"No," answered the servant, "other things were duly staked and lost, and thus has Yudhishtira forfeited his crown, his brothers, his queen, his all."

Draupadi rose in her pride, and drawing her stature to its full height, spoke sternly to the menial, "If my lord staked himself first, he thereby became instantly a slave, and as such had no right to stake me; for a slave owns no property and has no power to dispose of anything. Take therefore this answer to my husband, 'Queen Draupadi hath never been won."

The menial returned to the council-hall and delivered to Yudhishtira the proud defiance of Draupadi. Duryodhana's wrath was terribly inflamed, and he commanded his brother, Duhsasana, to drag the recalcitrant woman to his presence without delay.

Duhsasana hastened to the palace, and entering the chamber of Draupadi, spoke unto her: "O princess of Panchala, thou hast indeed been staked and lost fairly at a game of hazard. Thou art commanded to appear before thy lord, Duryodhana, and be henceforth his beauteous bright-eyed slave."

Draupadi heard these words of insult, and quaked with rage and fear. She hid her face

with her hands before the rude Duhsasana; her cheeks turned pale and crimson alternately; her heart beat wildly. Then suddenly she sprang forward, trying to escape to an inner room. But the cruel Duhsasana seized her by the hair, and the pale princess quivered pitifully like a tender plant shaken by a storm. Falling down on her knees, she prayed to Duhsasana, "O touch me not with thy unclean hands. Thou knowest that a woman's hair is sacred. How can a modest woman appear before elderly strangers in this negligent attire?" But the cruel Duhsasana heeded not her piteous appeal, and only replied, "Dressed or undressed, thou must follow me!"

Draupadi had now nothing but to yield. With her raiment hanging loosely, her eyes streaming with tears, her tresses all dishevelled, Draupadi stood before the assembly of princes and chieftains, and apologised for her imperfect toilet by saying, "Forgive me, honoured elders, for coming into this august assembly in this unseemly dress."

At the sight of Draupadi, Bhishma and Drona and other elders hung down their heads in shame. But the dastardly Duryodhana sat unmoved. "Strip her to the skin," cried he with savage ferocity, "strip her, Duhsasana; let me feast my eyes upon her naked beauty."

Such shameless profligacy convulsed the heart

of every one present in that assembly; some of them actually trembled with rage; one or two even touched the hilt of their swords, as if that touch offered some consolation to their oppressed spirits.

With heartless depravity did Duhsasana proceed to strip the trembling princess by pulling at her raiment. Draupadi raised up her voice again, "Hear me, help me, ye honoured elders. Ye have wives and daughters of your own. Will you tolerate this wrong to a virtuous woman before your eyes? Help me, ye Gods, and deliver me from this shame!" There was breathless silence for a few moments, and then Draupadi cried out again, "Why this silence? Will no one among you raise a finger to defend the honour of a sinless, stainless woman? Is the fame of the Kurus, the ancient glory of Bharat lost for ever? Have the Kshattriyas ceased to be a chivalric race? Can they stoop to such a base deed in cold blood?"

Bhishma's face grew dark; Drona clenched his fist; Vidura burst forth into a groan; while Bhima brandished his club, and took a solemn vow that he would drink the blood of Duhsasana and break the knee of Duryodhana before his days were done.

Duryodhana exulted over his victory, and addressing Yudhishtira said, "Speak, for thou ever speakest the truth, hast thou not lost thy kingdom, thy brothers, thyself, and thy queen?" But

Yudhishtira's lips moved not, while Karna laughed, and Bhishma wept in silence.

Dhritarashtra was sitting in his palace unconscious of the tragedy that was being enacted in the council hall. The Brahmans were chanting their evening hymns, when suddenly a jackal's howl was heard in the oratory. Dhritarashtra trembled with fear on the ghastly omen, and the very next moment Vidura came and reported to him what Duryodhana had done. The blind King wept at the news, and said, "The ill-starred Duryodhana has brought shame upon the head of Raja Drupada by casting an insult on his saintly daughter. May the prayers of an afflicted father guard him from the wrath of Heaven as foreshadowed by these dark omens!"

Then the king was led to Draupadi, unto whom he said, "Virtuous daughter of a virtuous sire, thou art very dear unto my heart. Alas! my son has wronged thee most foully. Forgive his folly and his crime, and invoke not the wrath of Heaven upon his head. I will grant thee whatever boon thou mayest choose to ask."

Draupadi invoked a blessing on the kind raja, and asked as a boon that her husband Yudhishtira might be set at liberty. This was readily granted, and Dhritarashtra asked her to name another boon, and Draupadi prayed for the release of her husband's brothers who, she asked, might be permitted to

depart with their horses, chariots and weapons. The second boon, too, was immediately granted, and the king asked her to name a third. Draupadi replied, "I am a Kshattriya's daughter; I have nothing more to ask. Two boons are quite enough for me: I cannot, like a Brahman, go on begging for ever."

The Pandava brothers were accordingly permitted to go back to Indraprastha. No sooner had they left Hastinapur, than Duryodhana made angry remonstrances to his father, unto whom he said, "You have permitted the Pandavas to depart in peace, but each one of them harbours thoughts of war within his breast. Permit us therefore to play at dice once more, and let the wager this time be that the losing party shall go into exile for twelve years and into concealment for a year thereafter. In this way alone can we avert a bloody war."

The feeble monarch granted his son's wish and recalled the Pandavas, and once again the gambling match began. Yudhishtira sat down to play once more with Shakuni, and Shakuni once more brought out the loaded dice. Once more did Yudhishtira lose the game, and once more he and his brothers became homeless exiles.

CHAPTER VII.

Banishment of the Pandavas.

The five Pandavas, accompanied by Draupadi, were slowly moving out of the city and wending their way to the forest. Their faded faces, parched lips, lustreless eyes drew forth a sigh from the bosom of every one who met them on the way. They were proceeding in absolute silence, as if their lips were afraid to speak what the heart found it so painful to bear. At last one of them broke the silence. "Arjuna," said he, "I can have no peace, no happiness, until I see that swelled head of Duryodhana's stuck upon this spear."

Sahadeva followed with a similar vow, "I will not unstring this bow until my deadly dart hath drunk the life-blood of those vile villains."

The third, with eyes brimming with tears, put in: "When they insulted Draupadi, I could not restrain my tears, but now I vow that I will not sheathe this sword until I have bathed it in the blood of those traitors."

The fourth, eager to complete the series of vows, shook his brawny arms and cried, "These arms shall

have no rest until they have swept those cruel tyrants from off the face of the earth."

Yudhishtira, however, kept a sullen silence, while these vows of vengeance were being taken by his younger brothers. His looks were sober and self-possessed, as if he were unconscious of what was passing around, and alive only to what was passing within. He was plodding on his weary way with his head hung down. An occasional tear trickled down his cheerless cheeks, an occasional sigh steamed through his speechless lips.

Draupadi made the most painful picture of all. She was clad in a coarse cotton cloth; her long locks were streaming behind her back; her soft black eyes were bent downward, as if the shame she had suffered were still weighing upon her heart too heavily to allow her to raise her eyes.

She marched through sunshine and through shade; the blazing noonday sun smote upon her unprotected head; the wind blew roughly upon her face; the night dews moistened her brows; the rain drops mingled with her tears upon her face.

At last, after days of weary wandering, they turned their steps into a forest, named Kanak Ban. The interior of it was so dark that they thought that night had come upon them all too soon. The trees were so dense that it was impossible for any one to thread their mazy labyrinths without getting

his shoulders brushed and scratched by the rough barks of their tall stems, and, what was worse, the paths were strewn with sharp stones and bristling brambles that pierced their tender soles through and through. In some places they stumbled down, colliding against unperceived obstructions; in others, they were plunged unawares into dark pits; and everywhere their smooth soft limbs were torn and lacerated by thorns. And yet the dark forest afforded them some shelter from the scorching rays of the sun, though it was hard to decide which was the lesser of the two evils—the burning and roasting, or the bruising and bleeding.

When night fell, the darkness became thicker; night beasts began to prowl about for prey; and the poor exiles had to face this new danger. Turn by turn they kept watch while the rest of the party snatched a few hours' fugitive sleep; and thus they managed to pass the night.

When the morning broke, the party were still lying asleep: there was no sun in that dismal region to herald the approach of dawn; there were no stars in that dark leafy firmament to mark the progress of the night; the succession of day and night was regulated by the howl of wild beasts and the song of forest birds. And shaping their rest and their movement in accordance with this imaginary time, they passed many a day and night

in traversing this fearful forest,—how many, they could not judge, except from the weariness of their own minds. They held their way directly north, until one day they suddenly came to the fringe of the forest, and beheld once more the light of day streaming in from far, as into a deep mine. Cheered by fresh hope they quickened their paces, until the glimmering twilight broadened into full day, and they had left the regions of darkness altogether behind. Now they came upon a tract of open sand. To toil through sand is a laborious task to any but camels, but it was ten times worse to these poor exiles in their present state of utter exhaustion. The sun's heat, too, now became tenfold more fierce, his light a hundredfold more dazzling, as each tiny grain of sand became a little mirror reflecting the sun's rays and shooting them directly into the eyes of the blinded travellers. The excessive heat caused also overpowering thirst. There was no water, nor a trace of it, anywhere within sight. Every hour they expected to fall down dead from sheer exhaustion. Even the trees of that dreary region afforded no cool shade, but blew only furnace-blasts upon their withered faces. However, they dragged on their weary limbs through the sandy sea, until at sunset, they sighted a peaceful little hermitage with a refreshing spot of water in front. Thither they wended their way,

and found welcome rest, and—some water to save their lives.

This hermitage was situated in a cave of the Himalayas. The Pandava brothers determined to make this grotto their home for the twelve years of exile. It was surrounded by masses of hill-side thickly wooded from base to summit, and affording vistas of the most charming natural scenery. For the forest, with all its terrors, is the scene of Nature's most wanton revels amid leafy boughs, flowery vales, and tangled bushes. Here the roar of wild beasts keeps harmony with the soft notes of birds; no human hand is here to mar the virgin beauty,—no human voice to disturb the eternal calm. Each season in its turn has fresh beauties to unfold. The summer's heat, the winter's cold are alike robbed of their rigour; and the rainy season is the most delightful of all. The floating clouds cast a fitful shade through the branchy bowers; the rain-drops patter melodiously over the thick foliage overhead, and filter down in fairy showers through the tiny apertures; the grass underfoot wears its loveliest green and spreads itself out, fold on fold, like a velvet carpet; the brooks and streamlets become alive once more, flowing in and out among the gnarled trunks in fantastic fashion, appearing and disappearing among the thickets in an amazing manner;

the thunder rumbles above your head with its roar deadened by the dense vegetation; the lightning plays among the tree-tops, leaping from branch to branch, its lurid glow softened by the sombre shade of the interior. In a word, the forest appears a veritable abode of gods at times, though at other times it certainly looks like a replica of hell.

Here at last was their journey's end—the destination of the Pandava brothers. They had fulfilled the conditions of their banishment by coming literally to dwell in a forest, where they spent twelve long years, subsisting only on edible roots, fruits and herbs, and on the meat of such game animals as fell to their own darts.

"I doubt if any living wight can match me in my misery," said Arjuna sorrowfully to himself; "we have been deprived of home and hearth, of throne and empire, of kith and kin. Each succeeding day but deepens our misery. As though to fill our cup of bitterness to the brim, Draupadi was summoned to the council-chamber, and stripped, or ordered to be stripped, before the eyes of all gazers! What further insult was it possible for these eyes to behold, or for that tender heart to endure? O, why did I not put that foul traitor to death, then and there? But, alas! what boots it now to repent over the past?"

"Nay," said Bhima overhearing him, "that fatal game had not only blinded our judgment, but also our eyes. We foresaw the disastrous consequences clearly enough, and yet we entered into the contest in defiance of them. And now what use is there in crying over spilt milk? When a king ceases to be just and virtuous, when he basely stoops down to violate the tenets of his religion, he ceases to be a king; the fates declare his crown and kingdom forfeited, and he himself is condemned by that same Power to pass his days in exile. Is it not laid down in our holy books that gambling is a sinful pastime? And does not our own fate bear out the truth of holy writ? We lost our kingdom, we lost our freedom, and we have lost all save our inglorious lives. Was it not a piece of downright madness for us to go on laying stake after stake, plunging deeper and deeper into the mire? Little use indeed is there in foaming and fretting over the past. We have made ourselves the laughing-stock of the world, not only in stooping to the gambling bout, but also in consenting to go into banishment as a penalty for our defeat in the wicked game. The terms of our banishment are so stringent that banishment is only another name for death."

Young Nakula burst into a flood of tears at these words of Bhima. Bitterly he reflected over the

past, bitterly he thought of the morrow. "Alas!" said he, "When evil times come upon a man, reason is the first to quit the sinking ship. But nothing can make amends for the past, except their blood!"

"Alas!" repeated Sahadeva, "Draupadi's piteous plaint in the council-chamber is still ringing in my ears. She was perfectly right in saying that her husband, himself a bondman, had no legal right either to stake her or to lose her. Why did we not insist on this point of law? Probably it was lost sight of in the tenderness of the appeal with which the queen concluded her speech. There were sighs on every lip, tears in every eye, sorrow in every heart—every, save Duryodhana's. I should like to know what stuff that fellow's heart is made of."

Yudhishtira was so far listening silently to the conversation of his brothers, unwilling to interrupt them, and yet unable to restrain himself from offering some consolation to them. "Nay, grieve not," said he in a cheery voice, "we have vowed vengeance, and as Kshattriyas we will fulfil our vows to the letter. As for our present lot—well, it is the will of God that we should suffer all this, and from that will there is no departure. What must happen will happen—what has happened had to happen. But our immediate concern is to go into

concealment, according to the terms of our stipulation. The greater part of our trouble has already come to an end."

Secrecy was now the one condition essential to the safety of the Pandavas; and with a view to this, they shifted their abode from spot to spot, migrating from one place to another like naked nomads. Each of these peregrinations was attended by a certain amount of risk, over and above the inevitable toils and fatigue, and the personal hazard inseparable from such adventures. The blazing sun overhead, the burning sand underfoot, the raging thirst, the bleeding feet, the aching toil, these made up a tale of woe, repeated each time they moved from one lodging to another.

One day they concealed their arms up among the branches of a tree, and went to the city of Virata, so that they might the more effectively conceal themselves. For, as has already been remarked, according to the terms of their banishment, they had to undergo a further twelve years of forest life if the Kauravas happened to discover their whereabouts.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Raja of Virata.

The Raja of Virata was one day sitting in his council-chamber, surrounded by his councillors of state, listening to appeals and petitions, and dispensing justice to aggrieved parties, when he noticed a group of shabbily-dressed men standing at the entrance. The Raja ordered one of his attendants to find out who they were and what they wanted. By the royal command they were ushered into the royal hall and allowed to address their prayer to the King direct. One of them, thereupon, as spokesman of the party, said, "The dire misfortune that has befallen the Emperor Yudhishtira must have reached Your Majesty's ears, and our humbler fates are involved in his. The reputation of your generosity has drawn us hither, and we throw ourselves on your mercy. We sought employment in many a king's court, but everywhere met with refusal."

The Raja was greatly moved to hear their story, and turning to his minister, said, "Yudhishtira's unjust banishment has caused great sorrow to his

friends and widespread suffering among his subjects. Thousands have become homeless in consequence of his exile. Duryodhana's inhuman barbarity will work his own destruction. I cannot persuade myself to decline the very modest request of these suitors. They do not ask charity: they are willing to work,—that shows they are not professional beggars. Enlist them as my attendants."

The Pandava brothers—for these humble suitors were no other—made their obeisance to the Raja and left the royal presence. A short while after, a woman clad in tattered garments entered the royal harem, and every one was struck with wonder and admiration to see her charming beauty. "Who art thou, and what dost thou want?" asked the queen of Raja Virata.

"I am a poor, heart-broken, grief-stricken woman," replied the ragged woman.

"What is thy name?"

"Sairindhri," was the faint reply.

The Rani's features relaxed into an expression of kindness. The youthfulness of the maiden, her polished grace, her courtly manners, and the sad but beautiful expression of her face, took the queen's heart by surprise, and she said, "I wonder thy beauty has not helped thee in warding off the blows of adversity."

"Well," replied the poor woman, "its effect

has been quite the reverse in my case. When Queen Draupadi herself had to suffer the blows of adversity, what is my misfortune as compared to hers? I am only her slave-girl."

The Rani then asked her what she wanted, and she replied that she wanted some employment by which she could earn a living.

"Be my hand-maid, wilt thou?" said the Rani. And Sairindhri bowed acceptance and proceeded to take up her quarters in the servants' hall.

We catch a glimpse now of the Rani's bed-chamber. It was night, but the room was aglow with the radiance of a row of brilliant lights fed with perfumed oil, which diffused its own fragrance through the air. The walls were of marble, shaped into panels of exquisite workmanship, and were hung round with tapestry of the costliest texture and design. The marble floor was carpeted with rugs and cushions of downy softness, embroidered with gold and silver, and high over a raised dais, canopied in silk, stood an ivory bed of wondrous workmanship. On this bed lay a noble youth, the brother of the Rani, lying apparently deep in anguish, and breaking occasionally into a pitiful groan. His sister, the Rani of Virata, was sitting at his bedside, smoothing his aching brows to relieve him of pain. But

nothing seemed to afford him any relief from his torments. At last he sighed forth:

"Are you prepared, dear sister, to suffer your brother to die?"

"No, no," cried the Rani, with some impatience; "I will not speak to you, if you talk in this wild fashion. What has made you think of death? Your ailment is only a slight one, and will be cured in no time."

"Never think so," replied the brother; "my ailment is not so slight as you think: it has its seat in the heart, and it can end only in one of two ways—either in my death, or—"

"Now, now, you again talk of death," interrupted the Rani; "I will not listen to you."

"Well, then," said the brother, "I must be shameless. If you will pardon my shamelessness, I will speak the truth, and disclose the secret of my sickness."

"What secret, silly boy?" asked the Rani.

"Will you forgive me?"

The Rani was puzzled, and did not know what to say. She thought that the young man's mind was wandering in his sickness, and she knew that in this state trifles light as air assume a serious aspect. She suspected also that there might be a secret after all, at the bottom of her brother's sickness. At any rate she thought there was no

harm in encouraging the young man to say what he had to say—sense or nonsense it mattered not. So she said in an affectionate tone, " What is it that is ailing you, dear Kichaka? Tell me all without reserve."

Kichaka now proceeded to open his shameless heart to his sister: "The beauty of your tire-woman, Sairindhri, is haunting me day and night. Her side-long glances have driven me mad, and I am on the verge of desperation."

At this his throat choked, and sobs convulsed his bosom, and tears ran down his cheeks in profuse gushes. The sight of these tears left no doubt in the queen's mind that her brother's love was a sincere passion. Nevertheless, she could not, for very shame, abstain from speaking a word of admonition and reproof on what was assuredly a most dishonourable kind of love. She said:

"Hast thou not thought of the dishonour thou art bringing down on thy noble house by this ignoble love of thine for a humble slave-girl? Thou hast blackened the good name of thy illustrious sires, and heaped infamy on thy own head. Fancy a prince of a royal household entrapped by the coquettish smiles of a slave-woman! It is the lowest depth of degradation. Love, true love, is a highly commendable virtue, but, my brother, youthful blood often causes woeful confusion

between love and lust, to his own shame, to the discredit of his family, and to the scandal of society."

Kichaka replied, "I am aware of all this, but you are probably not aware that my death is hastening. If it is your wish to see me die, you need not take the trouble to preach these lofty doctrines of morality unto dying ears."

"God forbid," exclaimed the Rani, "but my sincere wish is to save you from infamy. I am much grieved to find that my gentle admonition does only fan the fire of your foolish passion, and drive you headlong on the path of destruction. But if your alternative is to win or die, I cannot, as a sister, tell you to die, if it lies in my power at all to save you."

So saying she left the room and sent for her maid. Sairindhri came, and stood before her, waiting for orders. The Rani noticed her, but still sat silent, as if she were brooding over some past pain. In reality, she was thinking how to broach the subject. It was a delicate task that she had undertaken—a task as delicate as it was dishonourable. However, after a pause she said, "It is painful to see a woman of your accomplishments serving as a domestic menial."

"That is my evil destiny," replied the woman.

"I clearly perceive," said the Rani, "that you

are not a common woman. There is as much blue blood running in your veins as in mine. Well, then, you will be happy to hear that my brother, the Raja's own brother-in-law, is doting on you, and I too would be happy to see you the mistress of his loving heart."

These words sent a violent shock to the heart of Sairindhri—a shock not of surprise, but of rage. Her slim figure was seen actually to tremble, and her eyes flashed fire as she said, "Shame, O Queen, shame! I could not even dream that you would stoop to play such a disgraceful part, a part that even a slave-woman may not name without dishonour. It is for the first time I learn to-day that nobility of rank and nobility of character do not always go together, though the term 'nobility,' as applied to character, has a figurative sense derived from rank. It seems you have never come across women who would cheerfully throw away their life for the sake of protecting their honour, but, on the contrary, have only associated with those to whom the jingle of gold spells everything. I have nothing more to add beyond this, that from this moment I am no longer Your Majesty's chambermaid, but a free woman, mistress of my own time and movements."

"I am very sorry," hastily rejoined the Rani; "forget and forgive. Do not take offence at my

words. Only take this cup to Kichaka : he might be waiting for it."

The Rani thought that Sairindhri's show of temper was merely a pretence, a stage trick that women of that disposition can perform so well. She had no doubt that the maid was delighted to hear that she had captivated the heart of a prince, and that she would have no hesitation in carrying the cup to Kichaka.

Sairindhri on her part perceived quite plainly that the cup was only a device to bring about a secret meeting between her and Kichaka. Her first instinct was one of repulsive recoil; but on second thought she yielded, trusting to her own virtue to give her strength to resist any attempts at violence. Languidly she took the cup from the Rani's hands, and on her way to Kichaka's room, she argued within herself thus:—

"I am fixed on the horns of a dreadful dilemma. I do not know what to do. If I refuse to obey the Rani's mandate, Heaven knows what punishment will light on my head. I cannot run away: I have to spend one whole year in concealment. If I do obey the Rani's order, Heaven knows what my going into that room, alone and unguarded, will cost me. Who knows what the cowardly Kichaka may not be capable of? A young libertine of loose morals is as much to be dreaded as a loose tiger. Come what

may, I will struggle hard to save my honour, even though I may lose my life. So help me God."

With this she entered Kichaka's chamber, and what followed was precisely as she had feared. Finding her alone, Kichaka, inflamed with drink, rushed at her, and caught hold of her garment. Unarmed as she was, she was not unprepared for a tussle, and with the utmost force she could command, she gave a slap on Kichaka' face, and breaking away from his drunken grasp, ran out of the room.

The Raja of Virata was holding his daily court in the audience-hall, when a woman uttering wild shrieks rushed into his presence, and advanced with fearless mien to the steps of the throne, and cried, "Injustice, foul injustice, perpetrated within the very temple of justice! O Raja, thy downfall cannot be far off when weak unprotected women are freely dishonoured within the four walls of thy own palace."

One of the king's attendants tried to drive her away, calling her a liar or a madwoman. But just then Kichaka entered the hall, and catching her by the hair, dragged her out of the assembly, before any one had time to know what had happened. On her way to the palace, Sairindhri pleaded for help to a man whom she saw standing, and whom she thought she knew. But the latter did not consider it politic to cause an open rupture in the

streets. Nevertheless, he managed to whisper in the woman's ears that she should make a pretence of submission and consent to pay him a visit that night, while a rescue party should be at hand to deliver her from dishonour.

And Sairindhri acted accordingly. She made no further resistance, and meekly accompanied Kichaka to his room. As soon as both had entered, Kichaka bolted the door, and made solicitations of love to the maiden, saying, "Nay, reject not my heart's sweetest love. Thy fair face has bewitched me. Thy love has become my master, and I have become its slave. Don't be cruel; don't drive me mad; don't let me die."

Stretching out his arms, as if inviting her to an embrace, he continued, "Let me clasp thee once to my bosom, and soothe the burning of my heart, and then I am completely thine, and thou art mine for ever."

Sairindhri smiled an artful smile and kept a wise silence. And Kichaka was encouraged to go on: "Your veiled bashfulness has lit a fire in my heart. Do not hide that moon-like face from my rapt gazes. Do not deprive my fond ears of the music of that silver voice. One single word of promise from those ruby lips will save my life."

At last Sairindhri broke out, "Why art thou in such a hurry? Let the night come."

"You can scarcely conceive what waiting means to the heart of an impatient lover," answered Kichaka, in a tone of pathetic despair.

Rooted to the spot with shame, but with a forced smile on her face, she promised again to meet him in the night.

"I am content," said Kichaka, at last with joy; "those honied words have embalmed my heart, and breathed a new life into the moribund carcase of my body, and I am once more feeling my old self. I do not know how to render you thanks when I have made over to you my heart itself. Your kindness has enslaved me more than my love for you. Love, gratitude and honour have cast a triple chain about my neck, and if my life may be of the smallest service to you, I will willingly part with it."

How slowly time travels with an impatient lover is a matter of proverb. Every hour of the languid day seemed to linger an age: the wheels of the Sun-God's fiery chariot seemed to have stuck in the mud. However, the much-expected night came at last, and the advancing shades of gray afforded some relief to Kichaka's fast-beating heart. But when evening approached, the hours slackened their lazy pace still further. Kichaka lay in bed, with every sense keenly on the alert, starting at his own sighs, and mistaking them for the rustling of

his mistress's garment. At last the door of his room opened, and the fair idol of his heart entered. On seeing her he sat up in bed, and invited her to his embraces. The lady advanced slowly towards the bed, and threw off her mantle, and lo! it was not a woman, but a fearful warrior that stood before him and thundered in a stentorian voice, "Thou shameless devil! dost thou not know that a chaste woman does not sell her honour for the wealth of a gold mine? Now prepare thy black soul for hell!"

So saying, he pulled Kichaka down from his bed, and with one blow of his mighty fist put an end to his life. Then, with the swiftest dexterity, Bhima —for the cloaked warrior was no other than Bhima —scaled down the walls of the prince's chamber, and crept into his bed, no one in the palace knowing what had happened.

Next morning the sun was high up in the heavens, and Kichaka's chamber-door was still shut. This aroused suspicion in the minds of some of the inmates of the royal harem; and a servant was sent to see what the matter was. On opening the door of Kichaka's room, the attendant was struck aghast to see a lifeless corpse lying stiff and stark on the floor, weltering in a pool of blood. Great was the horror of Kichaka's kinsmen when they discovered what had happened, and the Rani,

his sister, fell down in a swoon when she heard the horrid tidings. In their wrath the people blamed the poor slave-girl, but open proof there was none against her. Indeed, the presumption was that a woman could not have accomplished the murder of a stalwart young man like Kichaka. At all events, the murder was regarded as a mystery, but the Rani could not shake off the suspicion that Sairindhri was at the bottom of the affair. She made no secret of her suspicions, and repeatedly declared that the very sight of the servant-girl was hateful to her, as it reminded her of her brother's death. At last, the Raja was prevailed upon to yield to the queen's importunity, and Sairindhri was bound hand and foot to be burnt on the pyre with the body of Kichaka.

The poor slave-woman lay in that cruel posture for some hours, and attempts were continually made to extract from her a confession of her guilt; but she bore her tortures heroically, knowing well that the Pandavas would rescue her when the proper time came. But her heroic suffering moved not the Rani's heart, pierced as it had been by the stings of her brother's death. After some time she was led to the burning-ghat, escorted by a force of fifty stalwart soldiers armed at all points against a possible attempt on her part to escape, or on the part of her friends to rescue her.

At the crematorium a funeral pyre had been prepared for Kichaka, and on this pyre she was ordered to ascend and burn herself with the body of her own victim. But before doing so, she was given the privilege, accorded to every condemned criminal, of making a dying declaration if she wished. Boldly she stood up, and spoke in a clear firm voice:

"Gentlemen,—If for one moment you imagine that your mother or sister or daughter had been subjected to this shame at the hands of this deceased prince, and that she had been as unwilling to barter her honour as I was, would you have bound her hand and foot and burnt her to death for attempting thus to defend her chastity? I suppose, the reply will be in the negative. If so, why is a helpless woman, who has no home, no kinsmen, no living but what you yourself provide,—why is a poor miserable wretch like myself—one who is ready cheerfully to welcome death as a relief from pain—why is such a one being accorded a different treatment? In a minute or two I shall be no more; but my spirit shall walk the earth—the spirit of womanly chastity that can never die."

Just at the conclusion of her speech a tall man of a robust constitution was seen running towards the river-bank. There was a breathless hurry in his movements, a wild stare in his eyes that seemed

to suggest that he was the bearer of an urgent message. He ran so fast that before the eyes of the guards could turn towards the culprit, he was on the spot; and before any one could discover his intention or ascertain his motives, he fell upon the captain of the guard, and with a blow of his sharp sword, severed his head from the body, and then loudly exclaimed:

"My immediate concern is to release this helpless woman from her cruel bonds; my next, to show to others how this tiny blade of steel (pointing to his sword) can work havoc among you."

So saying, he climbed up the pile and rescued Sairindhri, and on his coming down again there was a general massacre among the guards. With his sword he struck right and left, and before ever the surprise of the spectators could fade off from their faces, he had reckoned a score of victims among the dead. Some were decapitated, others had their limbs torn off, others flung far into the river below. The burning-ghat soon presented the look of a gory battle-field. Very few survived. Those alone escaped death who had turned to flight before the cremation. Thus crushing all opposition, the Angel of Death—for what else would we call such a dread destroyer?—bore the rescued body on his shoulders and vanished in the dim distance.

CHAPTER IX.

The Kuru Invasion of Virata.

During the last year of the Pandavas' banishment, Duryodhana made constant attempts to discover their hiding-place, as they in their turn made ceaseless endeavours to keep in concealment undetected. Every party that he sent out for scouting the enemy returned disappointed and reported that they had vainly searched each nook and corner of forest land and habited tract, but found not Yudhishtira anywhere. Duryodhana was made to believe that the Pandavas had been devoured by wild animals. Indeed, this was the conclusion to which his own mind had arrived in revolving the subject. For, what better fate could a little band of homeless exiles expect in the depths of a wild forest? The wish is father to the thought, and Duryodhana's conviction of the non-existence of the Pandavas became deeper and deeper as the desire to see his dreaded rivals dead and gone took firmer root in his mind. Drona Acharya, however, was not so sanguine, nor was the grey Bhishma for one moment willing to believe that the Pandavas were

dead. His eighty winters had taught him one great lesson—not to rush to an inference too hastily. He knew that the Pandavas, armed as they were, made a host in themselves; that protection from wild animals was a simple matter to a party of five young warriors, who were strong enough to make a good stand against a considerable number of human foes; that an archer like Arjuna was not at all likely to be taken by surprise. Bhishma's fear rather was lest Duryodhana himself should be thrown off his guard by trusting too fondly to the wild-beast theory. Kirpacharya was of the same opinion as Drona and Bhishma. He made no secret of his views, and when questioned by Duryodhana, told him plainly to his face:—

"It is really your safety that I am most concerned about—not that of the Pandavas, who are safe enough. Depend on that. The thirteenth year of their banishment is about to end: it is meet that you should try for an amicable settlement of the long-standing feud, and thus pave the path of happiness, otherwise I am sure,—well,--but I am afraid to speak the fatal truth."

The captain of the emissaries sent out by Duryodhana, finding himself outvoted, again broke forth: "I have one more happy news to communicate to your Royal Highness: Yudhishtira is assuredly gone, and what is better, Kichaka, his

most powerful ally,—Kichaka, the brother-in-law of the Raja of Virata—has also been snatched away by the hand of the assassin; and I am happy to foresee that at no distant date the proud banner of the mighty Kauravas will be hoisted over the palace-tower of Virata."

Duryodhana felt as gleeful as a little child, and with the impatience of a child, he ordered an expedition to be ready to march against the kingdom of Virata.

In a few days a Kuru army, led by their gallant commander Susarman, was marching upon Virata. It was an army equipped point-device, from the most carefully-prepared plans of attack and defence down to the very buttons of the soldiers' uniforms. Never did an army march out of the gates of Hastinapur in higher spirits or with stronger hopes of success. Of death they recked not; of honour they scarce could calculate the value; what they longed for was the proud excitement of the battle-field,—a sensation more prized by the heroic heart than mean pelf or hungry ambition is by the sordid mind.

The Raja of Virata was, however, not idle. He had received timely notice of the approaching foe, and had set himself to muster together as large a force as he could to repel the invaders. Without waiting for the actual assault, he moved his forces

to meet the enemy half-way, and came upon them on a vast plain, on which the hostile forces stood face to face, waiting for the signal to attack. For some moments it looked as if the two commanders were having their armies photographed—so still they stood, each looking at the other. At last, Susarman's patience gave way; the command "to charge" rang out sharp and clear through the silence, and then followed a flight of arrows through the air in opposing directions, to and fro, hissing and rustling, jostling and clashing in mid-air, some piercing the bodies of soldiers, others dropping down blank on the ground. The surging multitude waved on either side of the field, still hurling darts at their antagonists, and the confusion deepened. At last, the two crowds of combatants actually met; the discharge of arrows gave place to an encounter with swords and lances; marksmanship in shooting yielded to strength of muscle and sinew.

Nor did the commanders content themselves with directing the movements of the forces under them: they fought like common soldiers; and an arrow shot from the bow of the Kuru captain hit the body of Raja Virata, who was slightly wounded. But though disabled, he kept up the fight in order to encourage his men. It was, however, not encouragement that was needed: the

army of Virata lacked strength and organisation, and this radical weakness was already beginning to tell. They moved and wavered, stood firm and wavered again, and soon began to retreat step by step, until it was clear that they could not maintain their ground against the heavy onslaughts of the Kurus.

Shortly afterwards the Raja was himself caught by a war-noose thrown at him by Susarman. The imprisonment of the king was a death-blow to the remnant of hope that still lingered among the remnant of Virata's army still left standing upon the field. The sight of their own sovereign in the hands of the enemy was a signal for the captains to use their best exertions to rouse the fainting hearts of their troops, so as to induce them to make one grand effort to turn the tide of battle. Again and again did the Raja's men make gallant attempts to rescue their lord, and again and again did such attempts prove futile against a foe made stronger by victory. But these failures, instead of disheartening the soldiers, made them all the more determined in their attacks. Charge followed charge, onslaught succeeded onslaught, like high waves in a stormy sea. The attacks became more full and more frequent; they were no longer concentrated on a single point, but diffused themselves over the whole field. At last

they began to make an impression on the foe. The first flush of victory had faded, followed by the inevitable reaction of a corresponding degree of faintness. Suddenly the sword of Ballabha—the name that Bhima had assumed during his disguise at the court of Virata—cut the noose that held the Raja captive, and Virata was set free and led away from confinement amid a shout of triumph that rent the skies. And now it was the turn of Virata to retaliate. The attacks became more frequent and more effective, until the Kuru forces broke their ranks and fled in a rout back to Hastinapur. Susarman was captured, but to show his magnanimity, Virata set him at liberty and allowed him safe escort to his country.

Thus ended the proud expedition which the proud Duryodhana had sent against Raja Virata.

But this humiliation, instead of crushing the spirit of Duryodhana, puffed his pride all the more, and with post-haste speed he prepared a second expedition against Virata, this time putting himself in command of his forces. He chose a most favorable opportunity for his enterprise, as the Raja happened to be away from his capital. The news of the intended invasion soon reached the ears of Virata's ministers, and a special war council was summoned to decide upon the best way of facing the imminent peril in the absence of their

king. The heir-apparent was put in command of the royal forces. Horses, elephants and munitions of war were collected with the utmost speed; fresh soldiers were raised to fill up gaps caused by the late war. Excitement ran high throughout the kingdom. Even women did what they could to contribute to the efficiency of the army.

All was in readiness when it was announced that the enemy's forces had crossed the frontier. The home forces were pushed by rapid marches, so as to meet the invading army as far from the capital as possible.

At length, the two armies met again, and the scene that followed could scarcely be distinguished from that of the earlier expedition. The swaying to and fro of the tide of battle is a proverbial expression that has lost its aptness of meaning in these days of machine-fighting. But in that earliest epoch of human history the metaphor was a living one; the enormous numbers that fought on both sides were like the sea,—vast, surging, foaming with fury, at times dashing in loud breakers, at others reposing in noonday stillness. There were shouts and groans, "oaths, insult, filth and monstrous blasphemies," displays of individual valour as well as of individual cowardice. It so happened that one of the youthful princes who had been put in command of a section of the force, lost his

nerves at the sight of the slaughter and bloodshed, and quietly gliding down from his chariot, he slipped away from the field of battle and made his way home. It was some time after his flight that his chariot-driver missed him from his seat. The first thought that crossed his mind was that the prince had been slain. But there were no marks of blood anywhere around, and the inevitable conclusion was that he had fled. A party of soldiers was accordingly despatched to the palace to bring him back, and the pusillanimous prince was conducted like a prisoner back to the field of battle, where he was severely admonished by his own men for thus playing the coward at a time when the honour of his country, nay, the very existence of it, was at stake. Even his own charioteer took him to task for shrinking from the sight of blood, like a timid woman. This young warrior—for the drivers of war-chariots were as warlike, as noble in blood, as the princes who occupied those chariots—who was so long unarmed, realizing his precious charge, and feeling lest the prince should make another attempt to escape and should thus be captured by the enemy, drove the chariot away to a remote corner of the battle-field, underneath a huge tree, upon which he climbed, and fetched down a bow and a quiver of rusty arrows with which he determined to wage the fight against the foes of his master.

"I will teach you," said he to the prince, "how to fight. Let the horses gallop at will. A large section of the force has already been exterminated."

So saying he shot a couple of arrows from his strong bow, one of which fell just in front of Bhishma, and the other grazed the foot of Dronacharya, on the Kuru side of the field.

Dronacharya was struck with amazement at the precision with which the arrow was shot. He knew the arrow, and the hand that had shot it. He also knew that the arrow had not been aimed at his head, but was only intended to kiss his feet. And turning to Duryodhana he said, "I am now doubtful of victory. This arrow cannot be any other's than Arjuna's. It is an arrow from the bow of my own gallant pupil, who, though standing in the opposite ranks, cannot yet touch my person, but prefers to show his reverence for his old teacher by kissing his foot with an arrow."

A frigid smile passed over Duryodhana's lips, and in his heart he rejoiced to think that he had discovered his banished cousins within the stipulated period of exile, and that he would soon have the satisfaction of sending them to the forest once more for a further period of twelve years.

Duryodhana communicated the glad tidings of his heart to Bhishma, but Bhishma was not half so

eager to build castles in the air, or inhabit those built by others.

While he and Duryodhana were conversing together, Virata's charioteer thundered upon the spot, and rained down a deadly shower of arrows on the Kuru army, which was scattered to right and left, as the chariot made a ghastly lane through the solid mass of soldiers, and heaped a pile of dead upon the battle-field. And then the valiant charioteer spoke thus to his prince: "This is how a battle should be fought. Behold, the ranks of the enemy are beaten and broken, and your brave soldiers are hailing you as victor!"

Thus, amid groans of the dying foe and the shouts of his own victorious army, the prince of Virata was borne home in his chariot, cheered by the thunderous applause of the populace at every step as he drove through the streets of the capital, conversing gaily with his faithful charioteer.

CHAPTER X.

Discovery.

On the day following the victory a state council was called to announce the joyful news that Virata's army had won a brilliant victory over the invading Kura force. The royal hall was crowded to suffocation; representatives of all classes of the people had mustered strong to participate in the rejoicings. But there was one thing that caused profound surprise to the people. The throne of Raja Virata was occupied by a stranger, while four other strangers, robed in princely garments, were standing round the royal seat. This was a mystery which provoked the strongest curiosity, but the people were afraid to speak of it, except in the lightest whispers. They simply stared at one another in utter amazement. Who could the strangers be? Surely, it could not be a usurper that was occupying the throne. Some thought they knew the face of one or two of the strangers, but could not exactly recall who they were. Others, who had never seen the face of their Raja, did not suspect anything. Anyhow, the

prevailing feeling was one of inexplicable wonder.

While the spectators were thus making surmises in their hearts, Raja Virata himself stepped into the council-hall. His face crimsoned at the sight of a stranger filling the throne. He thought that the court people had got this up as an enormous farce in celebration of their victory over the Kurus. And his blood boiled within him at the thought of their shameless hardihood in allowing a subject, or probably a menial, to defile the royal throne in senseless hilarity. "Strange merriment this," he thought; "they will cut off my head one day, and call it a practical joke!" Coming nearer, he recognised the strangers as his own attendants, those that he had lately engaged out of sheer pity at their distress. And his wrath became all the fiercer. "What is this?" he thundered forth in a voice quaking with anger. Tantrapal, one of his ministers, rose up to reply, "Be not wroth, my liege; the stranger who occupies your throne is no other than the Emperor Yudhishtira! We should deem ourselves fortunate that our throne has been graced by the king of kings."

Virata was rendered speechless for a moment, being in that frame of mind when, owing to a sudden onrush of ideas, the thoughts are slow to take shape and run helter-skelter, passing in and

out of the mind without any order, or jostling together and adding to the man's perplexity. After a long silence, however, the truth came home to his mind in a flash, and he fell down on his knees and paid homage to the Emperor. And when speech returned, with clasped hands and bent knees, he said, " Pardon, pardon, my Emperor; pardon this shame in a subject whose head was more to blame than his heart. It is my erring judgment, not my loyalty, that is at fault. Accept me, Liege, as your trusty vassal."

With these words, Raja Virata broke into a gush of tears. The memory of the past twelve months, during which the disguised Pandava brothers were in his employment, came back to him at a rush, and he was pained to think what meanly services he had often taken from his imperial attendant. He thought himself as having committed a sin, for which death could be the only atonement.

Seeing the Raja's penitence, Yudhishtira stood up from his throne, and clasped him in his arms, and said, " What pardon can I give for a wrong that has never been done? I have, on the contrary, every reason to feel grateful to you for having given us shelter and the protection of your powerful arms in a season when the very heavens were frowning upon us."

"No, my lord, I crave your pardon; if aught good has happened unto you here, it is all the doing of that same unseen hand which has made you my king, and me your vassal."

"Well, well, reserve your tributes for another occasion," said Yudhishtira; "you know we have repulsed a second invasion of the Kurus during your absence?"

"I have just heard that," replied Virata; "but, my Lord, will you not trust me with the whereabouts of your brothers and of the queen Draupadi?"

"They are all here," replied Yudhishtira; "only, they have taken other names to cloak their identity. Here is my brother Nakula, surnamed Granthika; and this is Sahadeva, your courtier Tantrapal; Arjuna is your majesty's chariot-driver; and Bhima, I am sorry to say, is the slayer of your brother-in-law, Kichaka, under the feigned name of Ballabha. Draupadi is one of the maids-of-honour to Her Majesty of Virata,—the false Sairindhri who has wrought about the death of Kichaka."

The Raja listened to Yudhishtira's disclosure with gaping wonder. It was like a series of miracles that had happened. The death of Kichaka, regrettable as it was, no longer appeared to him what it did when he ordered Draupadi to be tied

hand and foot and cast into the fire. He now felt that the death that Kichaka had met was but a poor punishment for the heinous sin he had committed in aspiring to the hand of one who was more sacred than a mother, more chaste than a goddess. He reproached himself for having yielded to his wife's request in consenting to lay violent hands on the stainless queen. Despite the repeated encouragements of Yudhishtira, Virata's heart found no consolation, Virata's eyes no rest from weeping. The sense of wrong weighed heavily on his mind and oppressed him like a haunting spirit. Yudhishtira asked him to go to bed and take rest, as sleep was the only soothing balm of hurt minds. He added, "I shall refrain from speaking, if my words do but draw forth tears from your eyes. I say, let the past pass from your mind; don't you keep brooding on a lifeless woe. Time never walks at a uniform pace with anybody, however mighty a man he may be. Without its ups and downs, life would be a dull surface. Many a greater man than myself has borne hardships harder than those that have fallen to my lot. Your tears now sting me more acutely than any insults you might have flung at me unconsciously, or any hard service you might have subjected me to. You are a scholar: when will your wisdom serve you? If for your sake you cannot pacify yourself, do so for my sake."

Now did Virata feel that his bitter repentance was causing pain to his liege-lord, and, with a mighty effort, he locked the sluices of his heart and stopped the flow of tears.

Since the exile of Yudhishtira many corrupt and cruel practices had cropped up in his kingdom, and injustice and misrule were widely prevalent. The palace of Indraprastha, once matchless for its beauty and splendour, was now the dark home of bats and birds. The country was infested with thieves and robbers. The form of the government was changed beyond recognition. To describe the situation in one word, "might is right" was the motto of both the ruler and the ruled. Peace and security had become meaningless terms. The people longed impatiently for the return of Yudhishtira, and in their impatience they counted the years, the months, the weeks and the days.

The news of the discovery of the Pandavas in the court of Virata had spread like wildfire, and the chiefs and vassals of the mighty monarch hurried in crowds to Virata to pay homage to their liege. Some of them trudged on foot for many a weary league, only to catch a glimpse of their gracious king's face once more. They felt jealous of Virata, in that he had had the honour of sheltering Yudhishtira under his roof.

But Yudhishtira could not return to his kingdom

peacefully. He knew that he would have to fight every inch of his way home, and with this view he proceeded to discuss with his ally, the Raja of Virata, detailed plans of a campaign to win back his lost territories.

"You are well aware," said he, "of the circumstances that led to our banishment. The history of that memorable episode of my life can be summed up in one word, "gambling." Literally did I gamble away my kingdom and my liberty. I lost stake after stake, and at each throw something of me, some vital part of my being, was cut away from me. Thus I lost not only my crown, but also my very self, nay, my better self as well—dearest Draupadi. But the loss of her did not matter so much to me as the public disgrace she was made to suffer at the hands of Duhsasana, who, before the eyes of the gazing multitude, stripped her of her garments. Then it was that my proud heart broke with a crash. It was a kindly suggestion of the grandsire, Bhishma, that our penalty should be commuted to one of banishment for thirteen years; and we gladly accepted the terms, harsh as they were. You know what hardships we have borne during these long years of exile; only the last year of this graceless, cheerless age has been lit up by a glimmering ray of light beaming from your hospitable kindness. I have now faithfully served

out my period of banishment, and strictly observed every item of the terms imposed upon me. And now with a clear conscience, I think, I may return to my kingdom. Surely, I cannot wander a homeless exile for ever."

Raja Virata replied, "My firm conviction is that you cannot gain back your kingdom without a bloody war. Our swords alone can set all differences at rest. It is most difficult to win back in peace what has been lost by injustice."

Draupadi was of the same opinion. Woman as she was, she was a Kshattriya's daughter and a Kshattriya's wife, and she knew well the efficacy of the Kshattriya's ancestral vocation of war. As she said, "Reconciliation between disagreeing cousins is only a dream. Treachery has but one reward—death. What a foul advantage has Duryodhana taken of your righteousness! How cunningly he enticed you into a trap! How, under pretence of playing a friendly game, he robbed you of your fair kingdom, and turned you out of your home and hearth! How stolid must be your heart to be impervious to such wrongs! Let war, open war, decide the right."

"I simply wanted to sound you on this point," replied Yudhishtira, thoughtfully; "I will send my messenger at once to my vassals and chiefs, and despatch a special envoy to the court of Sri Krishna,

king of Dwarka, to take my part in the war. Arjuna himself shall be my envoy."

Next morning Arjuna was sent to Dwarka. The capital of Krishna was situated on the sea coast far to the west, in what is now called Gujerat. Arjuna had been a frequent visitor at the court of Krishna during the first twelve years of his exile, and there had grown up between the two, who were also related as cousins, the tenderest friendship that can subsist between two human hearts. On the present occasion of his visit, Arjuna noticed a well-dressed prince entering the palace-gates of Dwarka, just a few paces ahead of him. He seemed to be as travel-torn as himself, and apparently in the same hurry. The sentinels let him pass without a challenge, and he seemed thus to be a familiar friend or a kinsman of the king. Arjuna wondered who he could be, but had no time to waste over idle conjectures. He had come on business of the utmost urgency, and his mind was wholly occupied with matters of state.

On reaching the gateway, Arjuna was similarly allowed to pass unchallenged, and he made his way, without any ceremony, into the audience chamber; but learning that Krishna was enjoying a noonday siesta, he entered the king's bedroom, not indeed to waken him from sleep, but only to lose no further time after his waking. Just as Arjuna

entered the king's bedchamber, the other visitor followed him, or perhaps preceded him by a step or two, or, more probably, entered the room simultaneously. Arjuna did not like his looks, but in the presence of Krishna he forgot everything, and joy and love reigned supreme in his heart. The princely visitor proudly seated himself at the head of the royal bed, while the humble Arjuna contented himself with keeping standing opposite Krishna's feet. The presence of intruders inside the room broke the king's sleep, and on opening his eyes his glance first fell upon Arjuna, standing at the foot of the bed, and with an exclamation of joy he cried out, "Hullo, Arjuna! When did you come? I am so happy to see you."

"I am just come," replied Arjuna.

"Nay—I came first," broke in Duryodhana,—for the other visitor was no other than Duryodhana.

On turning his face towards the other speaker, Krishna noticed Duryodhana, and to him he said, "I see you after a long time. Happy is the chance that has brought you hither."

Duryodhana, anxious to secure Krishna's alliance by right of priority (for it was a rule of honour among the Hindu Rajas of antiquity that in case of conflict between two appeals for aid from two contending rivals, they decided to give help to the one that happened to be prior in order of time),

did not return the royal compliments, but said abruptly, "I pray Your Majesty do take part in the coming war and stand by my side."

Arjuna made no such selfish appeal, but sat as before at the feet of Krishna. After a brief pause, Krishna said, "I have no hesitation in contributing my own mite of strength for the benefit of either or both of you. But so much I have to say that in my eyes ye are both equal. To keep the scales even between personal friendship and political alliance, I would suggest that on one side I should place my whole army and the entire financial resources of my kingdom, while on the other I would place my personal self, without arm or armour. Now, let each one of you choose the alternative that pleases you best."

"Army and treasure mine," cried Duryodhana, impatient to seize the obviously superior alternative, and in his hurry making his sentence rather confused in meaning.

"I am content," said Arjuna, "to have Krishna unarmed on my side. I value Krishna's friendship far more than his legions."

Accordingly, Krishna's forces were speedily on the move for Hastinapur, and Duryodhana himself led them on. At the same time, Krishna himself accompanied Arjuna to Virata, going absolutely unarmed and unattended. When the two reached

Virata, a consultation was held among the Pandava brothers, presided over by Krishna, whose constant effort was to avoid the necessity of war, and who throughout the counsels stood up for peace, for friendliness, for the avoidance of the slaughter of kinsmen and the desolation of smiling homes.

It was agreed, on Krishna's advice, to despatch an ambassador to Raja Dhritarashtra to open friendly negotiations with the Kauravas.

CHAPTER XI.

Counsels of Peace—Preparation for War.

Yudhishtira's envoy arrived at the court of Hastinapur and was straight ushered into the audience-hall. Kneeling down at the foot of the throne and kissing the ground before him, he delivered his message as follows :—

"Thus hath my master bid me speak unto you: Pandu and Dhritarashtra were brothers: why, therefore, should Dhritarashtra's sons possess the whole kingdom, and the sons of Pandu not even a handful of dust? Duryodhana hath ever worked evil against his cousins. He invited them to a gambling-match, at which his champion played with loaded dice, and the result was that Yudhishtira lost stake after stake, forfeited his inheritance, and had to go into exile, submitting to conditions harder than flesh and blood could bear. Now they have fulfilled those conditions, and are prepared to forget the past if their kingdom is restored to them in peace. If their rightful claim is rejected, then war shall be declared, and the Kurus shall be scattered and cast to the winds, and their territories seized by the Pandavas."

So saying, the envoy hung down his head, waiting for a reply.

Yudhishtira's message appeared to old Bhishma to be a most just and reasonable demand. But on Duryodhana's mind it produced the contrary impression. His heart was lashed up into a storm of rage at what seemed to him to be a piece of intolerable contumacy, and in a voice of fury he said, "The vile villain dares to beard the lion in his den! Let him know that such idle threats weigh no more with me than the chattering grimaces of a monkey. Strong words do not mean strong arms, and bragging and boasting go but a little way in the bloody business of war. Tell Yudhishtira and his crew that Duryodhana shall not be terrorised by vain boasts, so as to yield back what has been won by his powerful arm. Tell the Pandavas to return to the jungle for another term, and then let them come hither and submit to king Duryodhanna proper petitions for his consideration."

The blind old Dhritarashtra checked the impetuous ardour of his hot-tempered son, and, in a conciliatory tone, said to the envoy, "Do not mind the strong words that have just been spoken. Duryodhana's blustering tongue has wrought more harm than his vaunted arm has wrought good. This is our message to Yudhishtira—that we shall forthwith send our own plenipotentiary who will

settle all differences between us as amicably as possible."

As promised, Dhritarashtra sent his minister and charioteer, Sanjaya, to the Pandavas to speak thus:— "If you desire to have peace, come unto me, and I shall do justice."

When Sanjaya arrived at the court of Virata, he was astonished to behold that the Pandavas had assembled together a formidable force of all arms. However, he had come not as a scout, but as an envoy, and so, without wasting much time in examining the Pandava army, he proceeded to the court-room, and after the usual greetings, delivered his brief message to Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira was rather disappointed at the brief inadequacy of the message. He answered, "We honour Dhritarashtra, but fear that he has again been giving secret ear to the cunning counsels of his son Duryodhana, whose sole motive is to have us in his cruel clutches. The Maharaja offers us paternal protection, but not the satisfaction of our legal claims."

After a pause he went on, speaking partly to the envoy and partly to himself: "Nay, it seems that war is inevitable. Reason can match reason, but to match unreason, you have to have recourse to brute force. Alas for the slaughter of kinsmen, the wail of weeping widows, the cry of homeless orphans; alas

for the wreck of the fair fabric of civilisation, built up brick by brick in the course of ages by the tireless hand of our sage fathers! Alas for my people that, in place of a joyful jubilee to celebrate my return to my capital, they will witness the grim spectre of war stalking through the land, to complete the work of devastation begun by tyranny and misrule, both of which gained a footing within my kingdom as soon as my back was turned. Krishna himself shall go to Hastinapur to expostulate with your monarch. We on our part will try all in our power to avert war: let the result lie in the hands of Him who is alike the Lord of Peace and War."

Sanjaya withdrew from the royal presence, and made the best of his way back to Hastinapur, and unto Dhritarashtra he thus delivered Yudhishtira's reply:—

"My Lord,—There seems to be a gulf of enmity between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, a gulf not to be bridged over by peaceful negotiation. Yudhishtira's mind is bent on gaining a moiety of the kingdom for himself. If we deny him that, a sanguinary war is unavoidable. I have seen with my own eyes the mighty force that the Pandavas have assembled. It is therefore no idle threat that they have sent us, but a demand, legitimate or illegitimate, backed by a powerful army behind

it. Nevertheless, it is my humble opinion that war should be avoided at any cost."

"You are right," said Dhritarashtra; "we do not love wild war, the child of hell, and shall strive our utmost to preserve peace."

As Yudhishtira had promised to Sanjaya, he despatched Krishna to the court of Hastinapur to effect an amicable settlement of the dispute between the two rival families. On arriving at Hastinapur, Krishna was welcomed by the blind old monarch in terms of the sincerest respect and affection; for Krishna was not only a powerful king, but also an honoured kinsman. He said to Krishna, "It is a high honour to me that Your Majesty has graced my humble dwelling, and I owe much gratitude also to the chance which has directed Your Majesty's feet hither. Words fail me to express in full what I feel."

Krishna replied that he was coming from Virata, on behalf of the Pandavas.

Dhritarashtra replied, "In any capacity, Your Majesty is always welcome to Hastinapur. My envoy, Sanjaya, has just come back from the same quarter,—I must say, disappointed in his mission, which was to effect by negotiation a peaceful settlement of the differences that have sundered the two branches of a once united family. For, I infer from what my messenger reports to me, that Yudhishtira

has fixed his mind on war, and Your Majesty knows well that on a heart hankering after the blood of brothers, counsels of peace fall like rain-drops on a sunburnt rock."

Krishna quickly rejoined, "I fear, what you have said is very far from the truth. I know it for a fact that Yudhishtira used every endeavour to avoid war; it is your own sons that are seeking it so assiduously. To father upon another a wish that lurks in one's own heart, is a piece of crooked diplomacy unknown to the straight-minded Yudhishtira. I will not recount the tale of wrongs that the poor Pandavas have meekly suffered—the story of the loaded dice, the forfeiture of life and property, the public insults heaped upon their heads, and last but not least, the inhuman outrage on Draupadi. These will remain as standing reproaches, blackening the name of the Kurus for untold ages to come, and eclipsing the lustre of any glory they might hereafter attain by the triumph of their arms. No restoration, no reparation, no reconciliation can make up for the treachery of kinsmen. Lost wealth may be regained, lost territories reconquered, but lost honour, lost faith can never be rehabilitated; once gone, they go for ever. With what forbearance, what patience, what perseverance have the Pandavas put up with all these wrongs! And now they demand, not mean retaliation, but a

just acknowledgment of their just rights. They do not hunger for your crown; they do not clamour for your territories; they only demand a fair share of their own estates,—or even less, just enough to maintain themselves in sturdy independence, as befits princes, as befits Kshattriyas, as befits men. They cannot, like beggarly Brahmans, live on the chances of charity. Once more do I, in the name of humanity, stand up for peace, and lift my voice against the carnage of war."

Thereafter Krishna went to the apartments of Duryodhana, in the hope of winning him over to his pacific views. He knew that Duryodhana's will was overruling the whole court; that the blind old monarch, Dhritarashtra, had no will of his own; that the gray grandsire Bhishma, though personally leaning towards peace, was powerless against Duryodhana; that Drona, Karna, and the other Kuru councillors were at best but Duryodhana's servants, and were completely under his thumb. So he thought that if he could persuade Duryodhana not to fight, there would be an end to all trouble. But Krishna's counsel, instead of softening Duryodhana's heart towards peace, stiffened it all the more in its narrow selfishness, as turning round to Dwarka's monarch, he asked, "Why art thou unfriendly towards me?"

Krishna replied, "I cannot be thy friend

until thou dost act justly by thy kinsmen, the Pandavas."

Failing Duryodhana as a convert, Krishna sought others, hoping thus to array a formidable majority against him in his own council. He went to Vidura, who, while listening most sympathetically to his proposals of peace, told him at the same time that Duryodhana was totally deaf to the voice of reason, and that his heart was set on blood. "'Twere better," said he, "if thou hadst not come hither at all. Duryodhana will take no man's advice: it is merely throwing words away. When he speaks, he expects all the world to give their assent to his views."

Krishna replied, "My sole motive is to prevent bloodshed. I came to Hastinapur to save the Kurus from the destruction that they are courting. If they will heed me, all will be well; if they scorn my advice, let their blood be upon their own heads."

Next morning, a full council of state was called, and Krishna took one more opportunity of counselling peace. Addressing Dhritarashtra, he said, "I have come here not to seek war, but to utter words of peace and love. O Maharaja, let not your unsullied heart be stained with sin. Stretch forth your hands in blessing, and avert the dreadful calamity hanging over your country and

your kinsmen. Grant unto the peace-loving Pandavas their rightful claim, and your bright reign will close in peace and glory. What will be your gain if all the Pandavas were slain in battle? Would their fall rejoice your heart? Are they not your own nephews—your own brother's own children? But let me tell this august assembly that the Pandavas are as ready for war as they are eager for peace; and if war comes, the record of it that will descend to posterity will be stained with the story of the faithlessness, the treachery, the greed that brought it about. Who can say what the issue of such a war—which, heaven forbid, I still repeat—will be, whether it will end in the death of the Pandavas, or in the extinction of the Kuru line?"

The feeble old monarch was afflicted with grief to hear this touching appeal, but pleaded his helplessness against the headstrong will of his headstrong son.

Bhishma was the next to stand up for peace. He advised Duryodhana, with all the passionate ardour of a grey grandsire, to follow the divine counsel of Krishna. But Duryodhana, only listened in sullen silence.

Drona, Vidura, Narada, and others followed Bhishma in their entreaties to Duryodhana not to let loose the dogs of war upon his own people.

Stung by these incessant appeals, Duryodhana could sit no longer; he rose up from his seat, and with his eyes blazing bright and his brows hanging darkly, he said, "Krishna hates me, and loves the Pandavas; Bhishma scowls upon me; Vidura and Drona look coldly on me; my own sire weeps for my sins and moans for peace. Yet, what have I done that ye, O elders, should turn my sire's affection from me? If Yudhishtira loved gambling, and staked and lost his throne and freedom, am I to blame for it? If he played a second time and voluntarily incurred the penalty of banishment, why should he now call me a plunderer? Fitful and flickering is the star of the Pandavas' destiny; their friends are few; their forces are feeble. Shall we, who never feared the king of heaven, be bullied and brow-beaten by a set of weaklings? A Kshattriya fears no foeman; he may fall in battle, but never yield. So have the sages spoken. Now, hear me, kinsmen all! My sire made a gift of Indraprastha to the Pandavas in a moment of paternal fondness, or, what comes to the same thing, political weakness. Never, as long as I live, shall they possess it again. Never again shall the Kuru kingdom be severed in twain: it has been united under my strong shield, and one and undivided shall it ever remain. My words are as plain, true, and firm as human words can ever be."

Krishna replied, knowing well the futility of hurling reason upon strong-grained prejudice, but still unable to refrain from speaking as long as there was any room to speak, "How can you, O Duryodhana, speak in such a manner? How can you pretend that you never wronged your kinsmen?"

Duhsasana whispered into the ear of his elder brother, Duryodhana, a few hurried words, hinting to him the possible consequences of such open opposition against the united counsels of a whole assembly of chiefs and sages; but Duryodhana paid no heed to his words, and left the council-chamber in high dudgeon, without condescending to answer Krishna's cutting question.

Once more the weak old Maharaja tried to remonstrate with his self-willed son, and Queen Gandhari added her voice to that of the king's; but still Duryodhana was immoveable as a rock.

Krishna, finding that his last attempts had failed, left Hastinapur, and came back to Virata, and unto Yudhishtira he reported all that had transpired at Duryodhana's court.

CHAPTER XII.

War.

Soon after Krishna's return from his unsuccessful peace mission, Duryodhana sent a challenge of war to the Pandavas. It was couched in the most opprobrious language, and designed to be an instrument of insult rather than a declaration of war. It stated : "You have vowed to wage war against us : the time has come to fulfil that pious vow. Your kingdom was usurped by me ; your mistress, Draupadi, was outraged by me ; you were all unjustly decreed to exile by me. Where is burly Bhima hiding, he that boasted that he would drink the blood of Duhsasana ? Duhsasana is weary with waiting for his leech-like lips. Where is arrogant Arjuna ? Let him come out of his ensconcement, and show us some of his parade-day archery." And so on, and so forth.

The challenge was accepted, and a formal declaration of war, conveyed in the politest terms sanctioned by political etiquette, was sent to the Kurus in reply.

On the morrow, just at day-break, the armies of

the Kauravas and the Pandavas were drawn up in battle array on a vast plain not far from Hastinapur, which for that reason is known in history as the field of Kurukshettra. Bhishma was chosen as the Commander-in-chief of the Kuru forces; and Dhrishta-dyumna, son of Drupada, and brother of Draupadi, led the armies of the Pandavas. Among the young heroes, the foremost was Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna by his wife, Subhadra, who was a sister of Krishna. Drona commanded the right wing of the Kaurava army, which was aided by Shakuni, the gambler, and his Gandhari lancers. The left wing was led by Duhsasana. Blind old Dhritarashtra was in the rear, and with him was Sanjaya, his charioteer, who gave him an account of whatever was passing on the battle-field. The army of Duryodhana was numerically stronger than that of Yudhishtira.

The military disposition of the hostile forces was carried on by the rival commanders in the coolest manner, as if the whole thing were a spectacular display. Everything that could heighten the pictorial effect of the scene was there. The bright banners of the belligerent armies floated gaily in the breeze; the trumpets sounded their shrilling notes; the war-drums beat their loud alarum; elephants trumpetted; chariots thundered; chargers neighed. All was in readiness, and every moment

the warriors were expecting the word of command to charge their enemies.

While yet the two armies were standing at gaze, a strange scene presented itself to their eyes. Yudhishtira dismounted from his chariot, and throwing off his armour, walked towards the spot where the Kuru captains stood in a knot at the head of their forces. He was absolutely unarmed —a sign that he was on an errand of peace. For, according to the unwritten code of Indian chivalry, no warrior could touch an unarmed foe. The friends of Yudhishtira were in amazement, and his enemies triumphed in the thought that he was terror-stricken and coming to propose terms of peace already. For a while breathless suspense held the whole battle-field. All eyes were turned on Yudhishtira, as he walked with hasty steps towards the Kuru chiefs. There was something in his looks that seemed to betoken an uneasy mind.

Approaching the spot where Bhishma was standing, he gently touched the feet of the venerable old warrior, and begged permission to fight against him. For the pious monarch felt that he could not bear arms against his own kith and kin without receiving the formal sanction of the grey patriarch of the family, even though the arms were directed against himself. Next, stepping up to Drona, he begged his old preceptor's pardon for

drawing sword against the Kurus; for he could not find it in his dutiful heart to match himself against the person and the party of that sacred Acharya, at whose hands he had first learnt to draw the bow. Both warriors accorded their permission to Yudhishtira, and the Pandava king thereupon withdrew into his own lines, and each party made the usual proclamation of "Fairfield and no favour."

Arjuna asked his great ally, Krishna, to drive his war-chariot, no other duty being possible for him, since he had made a promise before Duryodhana not to bear arms on behalf of the Pandavas. When Arjuna surveyed the warring hosts from his lofty battle-car, and noticed that the ranks of the enemy were swarming with his own kinsmen, young and old, his heart was touched, and he spoke to Krishna: "My heart recoils from the prospect of bloodshed lying before me. I do not seek for victory, nor thirst for power, nor hanker after other worldly good. Those for whose sake we might covet these are themselves arrayed against us in battle. What profits it in earthly gain or temporal happiness if we slay our own kinsmen?"

Krishna admonished Arjuna by replying, "It is not for the prospect of good or glory, temporal or spiritual, immediate or remote, that a man fights. He fights or abstains from fight for the sake of duty, without any thought of the consequences.

Thou art a Kshattriya, and it is thy duty to fight for thy king, never mind what the issue may be, to thy own self or to others. Take not my words as the words of fear. The highest glory of a warrior —if thou talkest of glory—is to fight; and no death—if thou fearest death—can be more honorable than to die on the battle-field. I admit that thy friends and relatives are up in arms against thee, but thou art not to blame for this, nor canst thou remedy it. Remember the doctrines of thy holy writ, and act accordingly. To be over-tender in field is to be,—well, I hesitate to use that word for thee. Affection, in other words, is a species of weakness."

Arjuna gave ear unto the counsel of Krishna, and prepared to fight.

Then followed a scene of tumult and confusion such as was never witnessed even in that bellicose age. Loudly clanged the martial trumpets; lustily beat the mounted war-drum; sonorous pealed the merry conch; and the Kauravas charged with horsemen, footmen, charioteers, and elephants of war. The Pandavas bore the charge with a front of solid rock. Not a soldier moved from his post; not a man recoiled a step; not a feather was ruffled from a plume. Then it was the turn of the Pandavas to reply. Like a whirlwind they advanced forward; like a whirlwind they shook

the ranks of the Kuru soldiers; like a whirlwind they raised a cloud of dust that enveloped the battle-field for a few moments and hid the issue of the event within a sphere of impenetrable haze.

At the same time, evil omens began to appear on all sides. Showers of blood dropped down from the skies; jackals howled in broad daylight; kites and vultures circled in the air. The firm earth itself appeared to be shaken out of its appointed course, and rolled unsteadily; and in a cloudless sky, angry lightnings flashed through the dusty gloom. Flaming thunderbolts burst upon the rising sun, and broke in fierce fragments across the eastern horizon.

But the heart of the warriors quaked not at these evil omens. Hurling defiance at one another, they engaged in mutual conflict, eager to win or die. Swords clashed against swords, arrows hissed through the air, and javelins darted to and fro in speedy flight. When the air cleared, the battle waxed in fury. Bhishma achieved mighty deeds; Duryodhana led his men against Bhima's division; Duhsasana charged Nakula; Yudhishtira charged Salya, Raja of Madra; Dhrishtadyumna went against Drona; Drupada was opposed to Jayadratha, Raja of Sindhu; at each point of the battle-field single combats were waging with uncertain results.

All day long the armies battled with unabated ardour, and when evening came, Abhimanyu, perceiving that the Kauravas were gaining an advantage, directed his attacks on Bhishma, and with a resistless sweep of his sword, cut down the banner floating over his chariot. Never before had the octogenarian hero beheld a youthful warrior achieving such an inconceivable exploit. Bhishma advanced to make a second attack upon the Pandava army, and cut a blood-red path through the stricken legions. Arjuna led his battle-car to stop the onrushing tide, and after a desperate fight he was only able to stem the advance for a brief while. Arjuna then rushed into the thick of the Kuru lines, and wrought incalculable slaughter. The evening sun had now dipped below the horizon, and truce was sounded, and the first day's battle ended indecisively.

All through that night Yudhishtira had no rest of body or of mind, because the fortunes of the war seemed to him to have gone against him. In his despondency he went to Krishna, who bade him fear nothing.

When the day dawned, Bhishma's palm-tree standard was set up again, waving gloriously over the battle-field, and again did Arjuna make it a mark for his unerring shafts. Drupada's son meanwhile waged a hot contest with Drona, and Bhima

showed conspicuous gallantry by driving back a herd of war-elephants let loose against his legions. Duryodhana, seeing some of his forces fly, spoke bitter words of anger and shame to Bhishma. He said, "Bhishma,—Art thou supposed to be the leader of the Kurus in this battle? Is warlike Drona supposed to be our shield and our strength? Wherefore dost thou linger in doubt and dread? Does a secret love for the Pandavas lurk in the soft corners of thy heart? Art thou fighting half-heartedly for thy Kuru kinsmen? If that is so, let faithful Karna lead my legions."

Bhishma's forehead flamed with wrath as he heard these reproachful words. In his impatience Duryodhana wished to win a clear victory in one day, and not finding this the case, he laid all the blame on the undeserved shoulders of Bhishma. But Bhishma was not the man to put up with such taunts, and in a voice quaking with rage, he replied, "Neither Bhishma, nor Drona, nor Karna either can wash away the stain of wrongful deeds, of outraged laws, of heedless sin. Canst thou, with thy cunning, conquer a just and righteous cause? Well, as long as I can, I will fight thy foemen like a faithful warrior."

So saying, he rushed into battle, sweeping everything before him. Cars were shattered, elephants driven back, horses dispersed, men slain.

Yudhishtira's army was shaken from end to end, as by an earthquake. Even Arjuna's heart quailed for a moment; but, encouraged by the inspiring words of Krishna, he galloped his battle-coursers against the advancing foe and parted his serried ranks in twain, scattering them to right and left.

Towards evening a fearful combat was in sight between two young warriors—Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna, on the one hand, and Lakshmana, son of Duryodhana, on the other. The young Kuru was about to be slain or captured when he was rescued by his father, aided by many chiefs. These delivered Lakshmana from his peril, and then made an attempt to overbear Abhimanyu, who was for some moments obliged to fight single-handed against fearful odds. Seeing Abhimanyu in danger, the Pandavas shouted for Arjuna, and Arjuna lost no time in hastening to the spot where his son was standing four-square to all the attacks that came upon him from all the four quarters. But noticing Arjuna's advancing car, the Kurus shouted "Arjun! Arjun!" and scattered themselves in flight. Arjuna chased his son's assailants as far as he could, laying Kuru heads low all along his path, and was about to pierce the thick masses of Duryodhana's soldiery, when the evening sun went down, and the signal was given for the cessation of hostilities for the night.

Another day of battle dawned; the crimson glow of the eastern horizon mingled with the blood-red crimson of the battle-field, so that one vast sheet of lurid red stretched along miles and miles of open plain, right up to the bounding skies.

The Pandavas now took up the offensive, and forming their troops in the figure of a crescent, charged the Kurus with moonstruck fury. Many were slain; blood ran in streams; horses writhed in agony; the air resounded with the moans of the dying. Terrible omens again appeared to view; headless warriors raced through the air, and the clouds became the arena of airy contests between airy knights.

The sight of the shattered chariots, the low-lying banners, the heaps of slain, filled Duryodhana's mind with fear, and he again addressed Bhishma, "Thou shouldst resign thy command to younger Karna. I suspect something amiss with thy heart, or thy head, or thy hand."

Bhishma again frowned forth the same answer, "Vain is thy might, Duryodhana, against the righteous Pandava cause. It is not in league-long legions that success in battle lies. Youth, might, and skill are alike helpless against the all-conquering force of justice. What can ten thousand Karnas avail against the eternal triumph of the Right?"

So saying, Bhishma urged his chariot once more

to attack the enemy, and once more he drove back all opposition. Soon the fighting became general, the Pandavas barely able to hold their own against the resistless sweep of the Kurus led by the aged Bhishma. The issue was still indecisive when night obscured the plain, and the combatants retired to their encampments to prepare for the morrow's struggle.

The fourth day of the battle found the warriors arrayed against each other as fiercely as before. Three days of slaughter and bloodshed had enabled neither party to gain any material advantage over the other. It was nothing but a series of attacks and counter-attacks, resulting only in piling heaps of dead upon one another. Blood poured like water, and human heads rolled on the ground like pebbles on the sea-shore. Beyond this bloody score nothing of advantage was gained or lost by either party.

The fighting still centred round the heroes Bhishma and Arjuna. Again and again did these undaunted warriors face each other, and again and again did they return to the charge after each repulse. It seemed as if the Almighty had divided strength and bravery into two equal shares, and given one to each,—so evenly-matched they stood throughout the long combat. Now it was Bhishma that yielded a step, now Arjuna; next moment it was Bhishma that seemed to carry the day, and the

very next Arjuna appeared to stand undisputed master of the field.

Such was the face of the battle in the earlier part of the day. Towards noon Bhima's Herculean strength began to rise into prominence. Like a whirlwind he swept against the Kauravas, who made combination after combination to overpower him, but in vain. He inflicted wounds on both Duryodhana and Salya. Fourteen of Duryodhana's brothers banded together against Bhima's individual strength; but like a lion licking his lips at the scent of blood, Bhima put eight of them to death, and put the rest to headlong flight.

In another part of the field a trio of Kuru warriors—Kripacharya, Drona, and Shali, threw themselves upon the sole Arjuna, and tried to crush him. The special feature of this day's fighting was fighting in knots; but each knot was successfully cut or dissolved, so that when the shades of evening drew a curtain over the gory scene, the Pandava's position, though violently shaken, was still firmly maintained.

The fifth day of battle dawned, and the sunrise was again hailed by the eager soldiers as another signal for war. Gaily and proudly did the hostile hosts troop into the battle plain, as though they were going to take part in some military pageant.

The principle of fighting in knots, initiated

by the Kauravas on the preceding day, was taken up by the Pandavas, and Bhima and Arjuna united their strength and made a combined charge against the enemy. Duryodhana wisely withdrew from their path, and left it to Dronacharya to repel their attack. Dronacharya had been the preceptor of both Bhima and Arjuna, and against his person neither pupil could draw the sword, even in the heat of warfare. It was a capital stratagem of the Kauravas, therefore, to send the old preceptor to stand against the onset of his pupils.

Once again the two youthful warriors, who on a previous day were gallantly grappling with each other in mortal combat and were each rescued from imminent peril by timely aid, were engaged in another fierce encounter. For hours did Abhimanyu and Lakshmana fight hand to hand, and for hours it was impossible to say which was the victor and which the vanquished. At length Duryodhana's son was grievously wounded, and borne away from the battle-field in a litter, while Abhimanyu returned in triumph to Yudhishtira.

Flushed with victory, Abhimanyu rushed upon Bhishma himself, hoping to crush all Kuru resistance by striking a blow at the commander. Bhishma only smiled to see him coming, and in words of the lightest banter, said, "I am sorry, little baby, thou

hast been torn from thy mother's breast so soon. But I will spare thy tender youth."

Just then the truce conch sounded a retreat, and there was a lull in the storm of battle.

When the sun shone again over the battle-field, the two armies were already engaged in mortal conflict. Bhima on one side and Aswathama and Susarman on the other, were the principal combatants of the day. The battle kept waging fiercely, but the chances of both parties seemed still to be evenly-balanced. The flying column of Yudhishtira inflicted some heavy losses on the enemy, and repulsed some of his fiercest attacks.

Then followed an incident that slightly varied the humdrum course of the battle. Confident of his own strength, Bhima pressed into the thick of the Kuru squares, and was straightway surrounded by overwhelming numbers. He was attacked on all sides, but his courage did not fail him for a moment, and with both hands and quick turning movements, he dealt darts at the enemy, putting some to death, others to flight. He kept fighting like a desperate man in a desperate situation, and in this position his strength, which was naturally as the strength of ten, grew tenfold more terrible. His chief object was to slay or capture Duryodhana, and thus fulfil his old vow. He gained the wish of his heart at least to this extent that he inflicted

a deep wound on Duryodhana's body, so that the proud Kuru prince was temporarily disabled from fighting.

Meanwhile Bhima was missed among the Pandava ranks, and Yudhishtira became a little uneasy at not finding him in any part of his own side of the battle-field. Dhrishtadyumna was thereupon commanded to seek him out. The young prince had not gone far when he saw Bhima's chariot standing empty on one part of the plain; and his heart sank within him. But on approaching nearer, he was reassured by the charioteer that Bhima was alive, and that he was fighting on foot within the centre of the Kuru ring. The charioteer also told him how Bhima's car had been surrounded by a party of the enemy's horsemen, how he had jumped down from the chariot to use his arms and legs more freely, and how he had struck down a horseman, and vaulting on the back of the riderless charger had galloped into the rear of the Kuru army to attack it from behind. The rest of the adventure Dhrishtadyumna could see with his own eyes. Far from the spot where he now was he could see Bhima's brawny arms dealing blows right and left, forward and backward; but, though himself unaware of it, Bhima was in a most perilous situation. To encourage him, the young prince shouted from a distance, "Fight on, brave soul! I

am near at hand." Bhima heard the cheer or heard it not; but Dhrishtadyumna's reinforcement turned the scales immediately in his favour, and scattered the remnant of that zone of besiegers who had ensnared Bhima. They fled, and as they fled, the dust that they raised mingled with the evening twilight and soon hid them from gaze.

CHAPTER XIII.

Duryodhana's Disappointment.

Duryodhana was wounded,—Duryodhana, who in his pride deemed himself invulnerable as a god. It was presumably a slight wound, one caused by a flying arrow; but Duryodhana grunted and groaned as if his life itself had been ebbing away. The fact was that it was not the bodily wound that was causing him anguish, but the wound inflicted on his proud spirit was galling his heart worse than the total loss of a limb would have done. He was supported by a crowd of attendants as he limped home from the battle-field. Entering his tent he flung himself on a bed, and lay down as though ready to die. Impatiently he waited for the return of Bhishma, and when that aged commander came, he sighed forth in the most pathetic manner, "Bhishma, I am dying. All is lost! The Pandus are carrying everything before them."

"Tush, tush!" replied Bhishma in a fatherly voice, "prate not like a child. Thy wound is no more than the hurt a boy daily receives in his daily

games. Have the affected part bathed in water and bandaged with a turban."

"Oh!" replied Duryodhana, "I am writhing in pain at the thought that the Pandavas have proved victorious."

"Nay," returned Bhishma, "that is an extreme view of the same sort as you held at the beginning of the war. A few days ago you made the mistake of under-estimating the Pandava's strength, and now you make the equally bad mistake of over-estimating your own losses. It is, however, a fact never to be lost sight of, that the army of Yudhishtira is led by a galaxy of able commanders; but I can assure you that the enemy has not yet gained any appreciable advantage over us. Do not give way to your gloomy fears: more harm comes from unreasoning dread of loss than from actual loss itself."

Duryodhana retired for the night, but partly owing to the throbbing pain of the wound, and partly owing to a rush of gloomy thoughts, he could not have a wikn of sleep, and the night seemed to him an age-long agony. The morning star was still faintly visible in the heavens when Duryodhana, wearing a bandage, led his army to the field.

Bhishma had made a special formation of the Kuru forces to repair the lost fortunes of the previous day. A solid wall of war-elephants ran

round the whole army like a chain of fortifications. Behind the elephants were the chariots of the commanders. Each chariot was guarded by a band of seven horsemen; each horseman was attended by a company of seven archers; each archer supported by a body of seven lancers.

Arjuna saw this fearful phalanx from a distance, and spoke thus to Krishna, "Dost thou see yonder intricate formation of the Kuru forces? The thicker their ranks, the easier it will be to mow them down. Dost thou mark how carefully they are shielding their leaders from harm by enclosing them within a triple line of defence? Cowards that they are, they are as chary of their blood as of their breath."

Arjuna then advanced to meet the advancing phalanx; and to meet Arjuna, Dronacharya stepped forward and challenged him to a single combat. As a Kshattriya, Arjuna was bound to accept the challenge; and the two warriors engaged in a combat that for the display of prowess, skill and patience, had no parallel even in that unparalleled war,

> "when every day brought forth a noble chance,
> And every chance brought out a noble knight."

Suddenly an arrow pierced the back of Dronacharya, and he was taken quite aback. Casting his glance behind, he saw Raja Shankha, one of the

allies of Yudhishtira, who, he felt sure, must have hit him in this cowardly fashion. Burning with anger, he turned round and dealt a blow at Shankha which instantly proved fatal.

The death of Shankha before his very eyes goaded Arjuna to thoughts of revenge, and turning aside from Drona, whom he knew he could not slay, he made towards Susarman, whom he remembered as the captain of a former expedition against Raja Virata. Susarman's warlike skill was of poor avail against the godlike might of Arjuna, who struck off his head with one blow of his sword.

But these gains and losses were only the retail business of war. The main glory of the seventh day rested with Bhishma, whom none could withstand in his infuriated rush. The Pandavas fell back in some disorder. Neither Bhima nor Arjuna could overpower him. Before dusk, the glorious banner of Yudhishtira was cut down, and there were rejoicings in the Kuru camp in the belief that Duryodhana's army had achieved a signal success.

When the morning's grey was overspreading the eastern horizon, both armies flocked into the battlefield, and again the onslaught and the bloodshed began.

To-day it was Bhima's turn again to display his prowess. Each slight Kaurava gain fired him to

fury, as each Pandava success inflamed the wrath of Bhishma; so that, as the tide of battle ebbed and flowed, it was alternately Bhima and Bhishma who rendered themselves conspicuous for individual valour on the field. Even in his coolest moments Bhima was a terrible antagonist; but when anger swelled his bosom he proved a host in himself. And thus this day he scattered whole companies of the Kurus single-handed, and threw them into rout and confusion.

Bhishma had to use all his arts of eloquence to rally his flying forces. He cried at the top of his voice, "O Kurus! Is this the far-famed Kuru courage? Is this the manner of Kshattriya warriors? Is this the conduct whereby ye hope to uphold the name of your illustrious sires? Lo, how I myself have over and over again risked my single life against a superior foe. But unaided, unsupported, I am powerless, even if every hair of my body should start up into an armed warrior."

These words went to the hearts of the Kuru soldiers, and six Gandhari princes immediately answered their commander's appeal, and advanced to beat back the Pandavas. Riding on milk-white coursers, they flew like a flock of swans crossing the ocean billows. They had taken a vow to slay Iravat, son of Arjuna, by a Naga princess. Iravat feared them not, and kept fighting, alone against

six, until one by one he slew five of the Gandharis; but the sixth and eldest, who stood tallest of them all, struck down Iravat before help could arrive.

Terrible was the wrath of Arjuna when he heard that Iravat had been slain, and terrible was the vengeance he swore. Mounting his chariot, he urged his coursers to fiery speed, and swept through the Kuru lines like an avalanche, dealing death and destruction all round.

Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha, followed by a band of his choice comrades, also rushed into the midst of the enemy's forces, to be avenged of the death of Iravat. Duryodhana himself marched to meet him with a herd of war-elephants; but Ghatotkacha scattered the line of tuskers, and exposed Duryodhana's person to the fury of his Rakshasa wrath. Just then a friendly raja interposed his elephant between Duryodhana and his enemy; but Ghatotkacha slew the huge beast with a flaming dart. Then Bhishma himself pressed forward with a division of his army to protect Duryodhana, and Ghatotkacha was for a while hemmed in by the foe, and would have been captured, had not the Panchalas hastened to his rescue.

So ended the still dubious battle of the eighth day, and Duryodhana was again stricken with sorrow and disappointment. For eight days had he fought tooth and nail against a foe, whom he had

expected to crush at a single blow. It was impossible to calculate the losses of the enemy, or their balance of strength; but he knew only too well the enormous toll of death and destruction that had been levied on his own party, and the thin balance lying at his credit with which he had to continue the weary struggle, for how long he could not say. He had hoped just to walk over Yudhishtira's contemptible little army, and he had found that it was not such a simple affair after all. His heart was plunged in grief; bitterly did he muse over the past; gloomily he looked forward to the morrow.

At this moment the crafty Karna entered his tent, and finding him in a fit mood, began to poison his ears against Bhishma's fidelity. "I am unwilling," said he, "to cast even a shadow of doubt on the loyalty of one in whom Your Majesty has so long reposed implicit trust. But you are doubtless aware that no army, however invincible, can prove effective if its commander happens to be halting in his zeal. The commander of an army is what the head is to the trunk: he has to impart life, vigour, inspiration to every part of the legions under his command. I fear, my Lord,—and I am not ashamed to confess it is my *fear*—that Bhishma harbours secret designs in his heart; and treachery in the mind of a commander is a weapon that can effect the downfall of an empire in one moment."

Duryodhana listened in silence, his mind wandering away into the dark suspicions he had himself entertained with regard to the fidelity of his commander-in-chief. And no less an authority on military matters than Karna was corroborating these suspicions. Karna was, moreover, the friend of Duryodhana's bosom, and his advice must therefore carry the full weight that attaches to friendly counsel. Duryodhana listened in profound silence, and Karna, after a brief pause, went on:

"I know Bhishma is your great-uncle, and a great-uncle is most unlikely to cause the ruin of his own descendants. But you must remember he is the common ancestor of the Kurus and the Pandus, and it is a common failing with old men to show partiality and favour to some at the expense of others. Every old man has his pet and his darling, and Bhishma can be no exception to the rule. And then he openly avowed his partiality for the Pandavas when he persuaded Dhritarashtra to grant them freedom. Indeed, it is superfluous for me to multiply instances of his fondness and affection for the sons of the late king Pandu."

"I thank you, Karna; I thank you," answered Duryodhana dreamily. And in the manner of one walking in a dream, he repaired to Bhishma's tent and called out, "May I come in?"

"Who is it that comes at this unearthly hour of the night?" interrogated Bhishma.

"Why, it is I, Duryodhana."

"I beg your pardon," hastily returned Bhishma; "come in, by all means. What is it that has driven you out of your bed?"

"I am sorry," said Duryodhana, "to disturb you in your rest. But a weighty thought is pressing on my mind, and I have come to disburden myself of it."

"Is it one of your old fancies again?" asked Bhishma.

"No, not a fancy," said Duryodhana, "but a nightmare. All night have I lain awake in bed, tormented by this demon of a thought."

"Tell me what it is, and I will lay the spirit to rest," replied Bhishma.

"Don't you see," said Duryodhana, "how every day the evening closes at our cost? O Bhishma, it is on thy matchless prowess that Kuru hopes and fears depend. The Pandavas are brave in battle, but they shun your potent arms, and carry slaughter elsewhere through our ranks. Remember your pledge—to save Hastina's royal race. If, however, —pardon my harsh words—within your noble bosom a secret love for the Pandus sways your movements, let Karna take your place at the head of my troops, and lead them to speedy victory."

Bhishma answered with a sigh: "Alas! Duryodhana, thy hopes are all vain, thy struggle a mere fruitless contest, thy mighty host but poor playthings in the hands of destiny. How often I have told thee that the right cause must win, that he who fights for the right is doubly armed, while he who battles for the wrong turns his own strength against himself. Hast thou forgotten that when into Matsya's pastures we made a cattle-lifting raid, Arjuna's single valour put thy numerous host to flight? Hast thou forgotten, too, when on an earlier day thou hadst been taken captive by the Gandharvas, and it was Arjuna who rent thy fetters? Well, that same Arjuna is still with the Pandavas, and he is now aided by Krishna, who is his charioteer; and thou knowest, Krishna is invulnerable. There is a divinity that doth hedge him, however dimly it may appear to our eyes. Duroydhana, thou art doomed in this war. As long as Bhishma lives, he will do his duty faithfully. But his end is drawing nigh, and then may other chieftains take his proud place at the head of the Kuru forces. But I repeat to thee, this Kurukshettra battle will prove a fatal fight."

When the morning dawned, Bhishma wore a frown upon his face, and a flame shot forth from his eyes. Duryodhana's words had stung him to the quick, and he now fought with all the fury of

desperation. From morn to noon, from noon to evening, none could face the wrath of the infuriated hero. The Pandavas fled before his path like herds of driven deer. Still amidst the dead and the dying, the fixed and the flying, Bhishma's resistless chariot moved on, till the thickening shades of night fell upon the horrors of the scene.

The good Yudhishtira was in despair; ruefully did he gaze on the gory plain heaped up with the bodies of the dead and the dying of both sides; and his tender heart could scarcely brook the sad spectacle. In the darkness he went over to Krishna and said, "Vain is this weary war, this never-ending strife, this ceaseless slaughter of friends and kinsmen. Woe is me! Our friends themselves are our foes, and in slaughtering them we are merely slaughtering ourselves. And with all this slaughter and this bloodshed we seem to be no nearer to the goal. The Kurus still carry the day! No force can avail against the all-conquering Bhishma. Vain the toil, and the turmoil, vain the fearful loss of life, vain the struggle against the decrees of destiny. Vainly do our soldiers bleed, vainly do our people lay down their lives for us, vainly do nations shed their life-blood for our sake. O Krishna, I can stand it no longer; stop this heedless slaughter, and let us go into the forest once more."

After this Yudhishtira held a midnight council, and some of the Pandava chiefs were sent to Bhishma to entreat love and mercy. The ancient warrior received them with the utmost kindness, but at the same time told them that as long as he lived he would fight faithfully for Duryodhana. To that he had pledged his warrior's word, and from that word he would not depart. But as a Kshattriya he had also sworn not to fight a vanquished foeman, or a foeman who fell or fled, or threw down his arms, or prayed for mercy; nor would he fight an opponent who made his submission or was exhausted, or was wounded, or was a woman born.

The Pandava chiefs returned to camp joyfully, and unto Arjuna they said, "There is now good hope of victory. Bhishma has vowed that he will not fight one who had been born a woman. We have one such in our ranks by a most fortunate accident. What do you say of Sikhandin? He was born a woman, but while still an infant, exchanged her sex with a Yaksha and became a man. Let Sikhandin be placed in the van of our army, and Bhishma will at once retrace his steps, and leave us undisputed masters of the field."

Arjuna was very angry to hear this proposal, and he cried, "Shame! What honest warrior would stoop to fight in secret, or to hide his heroism behind a woman or a child? I for my part refuse

to fight under this cowardly condition—to play such a disgraceful trick upon the stainless Bhishma, to practice such a monstrous fraud upon our own honour."

Krishna stood up to reply, and addressing Arjuna he said, "It is fated that Bhishma shall fall to-morrow. As he has fought against those he loves, so must thou, O Arjuna, fight against thy own kith and kin. He has shown thee how a Kshattriya warrior must ever fight, whether his foemen be loved kinsmen or loathed enemies. I tell thee, there is nothing sinful in Sikhandin's leading our forces. Whatever he might have been at birth, he is now a warrior, same as thou. There's no trickery, no fraud, such as thou fearest."

Being thus admonished, Arjuna went forth on the tenth day of battle, with Sikhandin at the head of the Pandava forces. Seeing a new commander leading the army of Yudhishtira, Duryodhana once more tried to prevail upon Bhishma to yield up his place to Karna. He now thought that a transfer of commanders was a military necessity; that the same commander leading the same forces from day to day bespoke a paucity of able leaders among the Kurus; and that a change would not only offer needful stimulus to his own men, but also act as an intimidation to the foe. And when he saw that the Pandavas had chosen a new leader, he longed

to follow their example, thinking that by doing so he would keep up an appearance of equality with the foe. So he once more asked Bhishma to give place to Karna. But Bhishma proudly answered, "To-day I will either overcome the Pandavas or perish on the field of battle. Do not vex thy heart,—the fulfilment of thy wishes is not far off."

With these angry words, the aged hero rushed forward in his chariot, and challenged Arjuna; and the two warriors began to exchange blows. Never yet during the war was fought a combat like unto this between Bhishma and Arjuna, who were assuredly the bravest champions of the contending parties. It was a combat worth looking at, and a crowd of soldiers indeed gathered round the spot to watch the conflict. Both Arjuna and Bhishma, the best of warriors, were now at their best, and it was a sight well fitted to attract all eyes.

When the combat was at its highest point of fury, Sikhandin fell upon Bhishma unwarily from behind; and as soon as Bhishma saw Sikhandin, he at once remembered the pledge he had given to the Pandava chiefs that he would not fight one "who was a woman born." At this sudden recollection his hands were suddenly stayed in the very act of hurling a dart; his bow dropped from his hands, and Arjuna's arrows pierced his body at every point. But still the hoary chief

stood like a rock, bleeding and dizzy, but still unmoved. At last, feeling that his race was run, his career of glory at an end, he fell down on the battle-field,—fell, as falls a Kshattriya warrior, fighting up to the last, and without a groan, without a sigh, not even allowing the arrows sticking out of his body to be drawn out, but making of them a couch whereon to lie.

And Bhishma lay thus on the battle-field, resting on his bed of arrows; and the sun went down, and the stars shone forth in the sky, shedding their calm lustre on the calm features of the fallen warrior.

The old warrior lay in state, unheeding the pain and the anguish, and talked cheerfully to those who had gathered round him to weep and wail. The mourners included Arjun and Yudhishtira from the opposite camp. Duryodhana and his brothers also hastened to the side of the fallen hero—fallen, but not dying.

Bhishma first spoke to Duryodhana, since it was Duryodhana who was uppermost in his heart. Many a time and oft had Bhishma offered holy counsel unto Duryodhana, but the proud prince had never listened to his sage advice. Bhishma thought that his dying words might probably make a better impression on that hardened heart, and so he said, "Pay heed to my words now, O Duryodhana. Listen

to the dying voice of a faithful kinsman. If thy stony heart is at all susceptible to sympathy, let it bid thee at once to stop this slaughter, this sinful slaughter of kinsmen by the hands of kinsmen. Spare yet, O Kuru monarch, the lives of thy brave chieftains, who have faithfully followed thee in peace and war, in prosperity and in adversity. Do not let the race of Kuru heroes become extinct. Give back unto Yudhishtira his fair share of the joint kingdom—Yudhishtira of stainless virtue and blameless truth. Let the Pandus and the Kurus live once more in peace and amity. This is my last request unto thee."

Duryodhana's heart sorrowed deeply for the dying commander, but his dying words found no favour there. His heart was still bent on the destruction of the Pandavas and the misappropriation of their kingdom of Indraprastha, and so he was determined to continue the war as long as there was a single soldier left to shoot a dart.

Next came Karna to see the dying hero. He loved not Bhishma, being jealous of his superior skill and the proud position he held as chief commander of the Kuru army; but now as the aged chief lay dying, the old rival forgot his rivalry, and came to bid him farewell in the darkness of the midnight. He walked as gently as he could, so as not to disturb the dying warrior; but Bhishma

caught the sound of his footsteps, and calling him nearer to his side, spoke in a tone of the utmost affection, "Rivals have we ever been, jealous of each other's skill and renown, and always at mortal strife one against the other: let now all jealousy and strife be at an end. I have one thing more to tell you, Karna,—but I fear my voice may fail me. Let me impart unto you a secret that I have so long kept unrevealed. Arjuna is not a greater warrior than you in any way. He is not more skilful than you in the art of war, nor is he of higher lineage either. For you are a prince of the same royal blood as he. You are the son of Queen Pritha by the Sun-god, Surya. Yes, the Queen Pritha bore you, as she bore Arjuna; but she bore you while she was yet a maiden, and the Sun-god himself inspired your birth. As an infant you were exposed to die upon a bare rock, to avoid your mother's shame; and a charioteer took you home and brought you up as his own son. Arjuna, then, is your own brother, and this war that we are waging is an unholy fraternal war, which it is your duty to bring to a speedy close."

Karna was startled by Bhishma's revelation of his secret birth. He was glad that the standing reproach of his being a charioteer's son was no longer true; but he was sorry that he had to acknowledge Arjuna as a brother. Of all people on

earth Arjuna was the warrior he most hated—Arjuna was the enemy he most wished to vanquish. Ever since that tournament of his youthful days, there had rankled in his heart a bitter jealousy of Arjuna; and it was the one aim of his life to fight down this hated rival. Hence Bhishma's appeal to bring the war to a speedy close produced as little impression upon Karna's mind as it had done upon Duryodhana's.

A military guard was placed round Bhishma as he lay on his couch of spikes, awaiting his hour. By an exercise of his stupendous will-power, the sinless chief held off the hour of doom, until the day of the next full moon, and then he calmly yielded his heroic soul to its Maker.

The Kauravas held another council of war, at which they chose the Brahman chief, Dronacharya, as the leader of the Kuru forces, in place of Bhishma. The Pandava brothers heard the news with dread, as Drona had been their preceptor, and against him they deemed it sin to wage war, for the preceptor's person was regarded in ancient India as sacred and inviolable.

CHAPTER XIV.

Dronacharya, the new leader of the Kurus.

On the morning following the fall of Bhishma, Dronacharya's proud banner fluttered gaily over the battle-field, displaying its well-known device of a golden altar standing upon a deerskin,—the altar being emblematic of his priestly caste, and the deerskin, of his hermit life. For every Brahman preceptor was, in the ancient days of India, a holy recluse, living in absolute retirement from the world, and having no earthly ambition save that of imparting truth and wisdom unto those modest groups of young scholars that gathered round him as his disciples.

Before Drona took up his command he swore a solemn oath before Duryodhana that he would bring Yudhishtira in chains to the Kuru camp.

Arjuna heard of this dreadful vow, and unto Yudhishtira he said, "The person of our old preceptor is sacred; we cannot take his life; we cannot slay him even in this fratricidal war, in which everyone seems to be free to slay everyone else. But yet, the vow that he has taken is a

terrible one. Let me match a vow of my own to his,—that never, as long as one drop of blood lies in my body, shall Yudhishtira's person suffer so much harm as the loss of a hair,—that Drona shall not come near Yudhishtira except by trampling over Arjuna's corpse!"

Before mounting his chariot, Drona addressed a prayer to the gods, and a short appeal to his soldiers. The latter ran as follows:—

"Soldiers! The honour of leading the gallant forces has fallen upon me to-day. Upon me rests the weighty responsibility of conducting this war, which by the grace of God, I fervently hope, will end in a complete triumph for the Kuru cause. But no general, however valiant, can achieve success alone: he must have the hearty support, the willing co-operation of the hosts that follow him. And thus it is that ye should remember that the honour of your king and country, the safety of your home and hearth, depend upon your noble exertions. Let each individual soldier feel this in his heart, and do his duty manfully, regardless of consequences."

On the first day of Drona's command, Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu, showed himself foremost in the fight, displaying conspicuous gallantry time after time, and proving himself the most promising warrior among the rising generation. His first

encounter on this day was with a Kuru Raja, named Paurava. Abhimanyu dragged him by the hair out of his chariot, and dashed him on the ground, breaking his bones to pieces. Seeing Paurava in peril, Jayadratha, king of Sindhu, hastened to his aid. With lifted sword Jayadratha ran towards Abhimanyu, and with lifted sword did Abhimanyu meet him. The two swords soon clashed, and re-clashed, neither combatant being able to strike his adversary in any part of the body, until Jayadratha, suddenly lowering his arm, aimed a thrust at Abhimanyu's heart; but Abhimanyu received the blow upon his shield. There was a loud metallic clang, and lo! Jayadratha's sword bent and broke in two, and Jayadratha himself fled to his chariot and ran off from the battle-field, leaving it to another Kuru chief—Salya, king of Madra—to deal with Abhimanyu.

Just then, however, help arrived. Bhima came forward with uplifted mace, and engaged Salya in a personal contest. Both were specially skilled in wielding the battle-mace, and the blows they exchanged were accompanied by a noise like that of two angry lions fighting for the same prey. Each stood like a tall cliff bearing the other's blows as lightly as though they were merely loud gusts of wind. Warmer, fiercer, deadlier grew the contest; but still neither warrior seemed willing

to yield a step or to forego a blow until the one or the other should fall. At length, as chance would have it, both staggered and fell. Bhima, however, immediately sprang to his feet again, and lifted up his mace from the ground to strike the decisive blow; but seeing his antagonist bleeding and senseless, he allowed him to be borne away by his attendants to a place of shelter.

In another part of the field, Dronacharya was figuring as the chief actor. Seeing Yudhishtira for a moment unguarded, he dashed his chariot straight towards him with a view to fulfilling his vow of capturing him and conducting him in triumph to the Kuru camp. A note of warning immediately rang through the Pandava ranks, and Arjuna, knowing his king to be in peril, hastened towards Yudhishtira to ward off the threatened danger. Driving his milk-white coursers at full speed, Arjuna soon threw the Kuru chieftain behind, and reached Yudhishtira's side ere even the dust of Drona's chariot was visible to Yudhishtira's eyes.

In other parts of the battle-field the look of things to-day could hardly be distinguished from that of other days. Swords clashed against swords or clanged upon shields; lances shivered in fragments; battle-axes cleaved helmets; horses rolled over and fell heavily on the ground; chariots stuck into the earth, hoodless, wheel-less; elephants

careered madly with uplifted tail and trunk. It was a mere repetition of a story grown stale by frequence. Slaughter and bloodshed had now become commonplaces of the war; flights and pursuits; dispersals and rallyings; cries of triumph and cries of despair, mingled with the cries of onset and the cries of encouragement—these were the humdrum occurrences of the day, which the most careful chronicler would not care to chronicle. And amid these uneventful events the creeping shades of darkness stole over the battle plain, and the welcome trumpet sounded once more the close of the struggle.

Next morning Drona made a second attempt to fulfil his vow of capturing Yudhishtira. He directed the entire movement of his troops towards a single objective—the person of Yudhishtira; he aimed all his shafts at a single target—the king Yudhishtira; upon Yudhishtira he concentrated his gaze; for Yudhishtira his soul thirsted. With a view to facilitating the capture of Yudhishtira, he drew Arjuna away from his side by prompting Susarman to send him a challenge to single combat. Arjuna accepted the challenge, but kept his eye on Yudhishtira still. He perceived the secret motive of the challenge, but remembered his own vow, and so speedily putting his opponent to death, he came back to his post to guard the person of Yudhishtira.

While Drona was thus directing his energies towards the capture of Yudhishtira, the main body of the Kuru army was not idle. Many a Kuru chief planned separate attacks against different points of the Pandava army, trying thus to put it to rout and confusion, and hoping thereby to make the capture of Yudhishtira an easier task. Duryodhana made an attack upon Bhima, but was wounded after a short fight, and obliged to withdraw from the field. Arjuna then noticed a combined attack advancing against himself, and, in order to avoid the brunt of the blow, he made a sweeping rush at the approaching enemy, and broke their lines rank by rank, dispersing them in disunited bands towards east and west. This was a masterly exploit, for it retarded the Kuru advance permanently, at least for that day. Karna saw this, and his jealous heart was inflamed with envy. Unable to restrain himself, he attacked Arjuna desperately, determined to eclipse his glory or to end his own life. Long and loud the contest raged, but neither Karna nor Arjuna gained the victory, and both had to content themselves with exchanging ineffective blows, until night fell, and the combatants had to part.

CHAPTER XV.

Death of Abhimanyu.

The twelfth day of battle dawned gloomily over the blood-besprinkled plain. Drona was in the highest spirits; his energies were still fresh; his resources were still unexhausted. He arranged his forces to-day in the shape of a spider's web, in order to make his lines practically impenetrable, save under risk of imminent death or capture. Intricate military formations like the foregoing were a feature of ancient Indian warfare, but were, as a rule, adopted as measures of desperation, more or less. To entice Arjuna into the snare, a challenge was sent to him, as on the preceding day. Arjuna shrewdly perceived the dodge, which was, like the invitation of the sly spider to the fly, to "come into his parlour." Arjuna accepted the challenge, but did not leave his post, and sent his son Abhimanyu to fight the challenger. The young hero was heartily glad to undertake the fight, and mounting his car he drove forward with such impetuous speed that it seemed as if his object was, not to fight in response to the challenge, but to

sweep off the entire Kuru army in one resistless rush. This was a critical situation. To stop his onward course, therefore, Duryodhana marched against him with a strong force. But Abhimanyu inflicted a wound on Duryodhana, and slew quickly his body-guard to a man. The next to stand against the young Pandava was Salya, chief of Madra; and him, too, Abhimanyu disabled with a few shots from his unerring bow, and then resumed his onward march.

Duhsasana came forward next to obstruct his path. Abhimanyu smiled a smile of scorn to see him, and spoke to him thus, "Art thou not he who plotted with Shakuni to win Yudhishtira's kingdom by foul treachery? Art thou not he? Art thou not he who dragged Queen Draupadi by the hair, and insulted her before the eyes of rude gazers? Didst thou not call Bhima thy bounden slave? Didst thou not wrong my father, Arjuna? Welcome, thou art my dearest foe,—to thee I owe my warmest pledge of enmity."

With these words, the fierce youth flung a dreadful dart at Duhsasana, and the Kuru prince instantly dropped on the ground, stunned and dazed by the blow. But a number of Kuru chiefs ran to his help and rescued him from the jaws of death, bearing him away, bleeding and unconscious, from the battlefield.

Another Kuru leader then strove to stop Abhimanyu; but Abhimanyu only brushed him away like a pestering fly, and resumed his resistless course through the battlefield.

Next came Jayadratha, king of Sindhu, who made a dark league with six other marauding chiefs to attack Abhimanyu, round whom the seven cruel assailants made a fatal girdle, from each point of which darts were hurled at him with relentless fury. All undaunted, Abhimanyu kept up the unequal fight for hours. At length, his gay peacock standard was shot down; his chariot was smashed to pieces; his coursers slain; his charioteer captured. Still undaunted, Abhimanyu presented a revolving front to the seven individual assailants who attacked him simultaneously. His body was mangled with wounds; blood was smearing his face and lips; blood had dyed his garments from neck to knee; blood had stained his arms and weapons; but still the youthful hero fought on, growing dizzy and faint with loss of blood, tottering in his legs, feeling his life itself to be ebbing away. At last, unable to bear up any longer, he fell down, bleeding, exhausted, lifeless. He fell like a lordly tusker of the forest, mangled to death by a cordon of cruel hunters,—extinguished like a quenched wildfire,—sunk like the resplendent Sun-god behind the western hill,—darkened like the moon in an eclipse.

So ended the day's battle, and the sun went down and the stars came out in the darkened sky, and shed their chill rays of light over Abhimanyu's cold remains.

Arjuna was at that time far away, fighting on a distant part of the battlefield; and as he was returning to his camp he came across many an evil portent on the way, and spoke to his charioteer in a voice faint with gloomy apprehensions, " Why, O Krishna, do evil omens strike my eye to-night? Why are my spirits so strangely depressed? Why is such a solemn silence pervading the whole field?" And as he neared his own camp, he remarked again to Krishna, " Why is Yudhishtira's tent so still to-night? Why is my Abhimanyu not coming forward to greet my arrival?"

With slow and hesitating steps he entered the tent of Yudhishtira, who burst into tears at the sight of Arjuna, and then told him how his gallant son had died fighting single-handed against tremendous odds,—how the base Jayadratha, conspiring with six other bloody assassins, had fallen upon the young hero and literally hacked him to pieces.

Arjuna could only utter one shriek—"Brave boy!"—and with that, he sank in a swoon upon the ground. For some moments he lay unconscious, and when he opened his eyes again, a thrill of

passionate indignation shook his whole frame, and he said unto Yudhishtira, "Did you say that Jayadratha overpowered my helpless son by leaguing himself in a cruel conspiracy to assassinate him? For it is nothing short of cold-blooded murder for seven armed ruffians to fall upon a single helpless boy. Could the Kurus stoop down to such a shameless crime, such an outrage on the laws of honour, such a vile stain on the Kshattriya character? May an angry warrior's wrath smite them in this world, and a bereaved father's curse pursue them in the next! Now, good Yudhishtira, hear my vow,—may I never attain the bliss of heaven if I do not slay Jayadratha before to-morrow's day is done! May my soul go unto hell and be condemned to the same punishment as is meted out to deadly sinners, if before to-morrow's sunset I do not slay Jayadratha!"

All that night there was sorrow and lamentation in the Pandava camp; and when morning dawned, Arjuna sounded a long shrill note on his war-conch, as a signal for the dreadful vow he was going to fulfil that day.

The Kurus heard of Arjuna's vow; they heard the sound of Arjuna's conch; and they prepared for a fierce fight that day. Some of the assassins of Abhimanyu quailed with fear. Jayadratha was almost fainting with terror, almost unwilling to

appear on the battlefield. He repaired to Duryodhana's tent before daybreak, and said to that prince, "Arjuna's vow has made me despair of my life. Why has he chosen me, of all, as the object of his vengeful wrath? Many of his kinsmen have been slain by the Kurus from day to day, but never before has he taken a terrible vow like this. Arjuna is without doubt the bravest of our foes, and his vow is therefore not like a drunkard's oath that we can afford to laugh to scorn. I fear my end has come."

"Don't lose heart," said Duryodhana; "it does not become a warrior to be afraid of death like this. Every moment of a soldier's life is a playing with death. I am inclined to say that, instead of this day proving your last, it will end in Arjuna's own death."

"Nay," said Jayadratha, "my danger is imminent."

"My whole army," replied Duryodhana, "has been commanded to guard you with particular care to-day. So you have nothing to fear."

The trumpets sounded the commencement of the battle, and Arjuna, mounting his chariot, said to Krishna, "Gallop my gallant greys as fast as you can, for to-day my task is a dreadful one,—I have to fulfil my vow within the duration of daylight, or, failing that, I surrender my life."

Arjuna's battle-car thundered with a roar that shook the plain from end to end. The first to check its onward course was Durmasan ; but Arjuna lightly drove him off, and passed on.

Next came Duhsasana, who attacked Arjuna with a herd of battle-elephants ; but the thunder of his chariot threw the huge beasts into a sudden panic,—and Arjuna passed on.

Dronacharya himself came next in his way, and challenged him to a single fight. But Arjuna humbly excused himself, saying, "Forgive thy pupil, if he declines to-day to accept thy challenge. To-day he is proceeding against the slayer of his Abhimanyu, in fulfilment of a mighty vow that he has taken."

Passing alongside of Drona, Arjuna's fiery car thundered on through the bending Kuru ranks, sweeping away all obstruction, all opposition, and steering in search of Jayadratha.

All day long the thunder of Arjuna's chariot echoed and re-echoed on the battle-plain ; but Jayadratha was nowhere to be sighted. Krishna perceived that the horses were tired, and needed some urgent rest and refreshment. So, underneath a shady tree, the jaded beasts were taken out of the shafts and given rest and food, and then harnessed again to the car, and the car sped again over the ringing plain. But Jayadratha was nowhere within

sight. Many another Kuru chief came in Arjuna's way; some he slew, and some he shunned; but his chief enemy was still beyond his ken. Arjuna was beginning to despair, when suddenly in a corner of the battle-field, guarded by a squadron of bristling arms, Jayadratha was at last sighted. The sun was about to set, and there was no time to be lost. But still the prize was not to be gained so lightly. Karna, who was one of Jayadratha's guards, seeing Arjuna advancing towards him, rushed forward, and engaged him in a contest, with the sole object of gaining time. There were only a few minutes wanting to sunset; and at sunset, if by that hour Arjuna failed to fulfil his vow, he would have to lay down his life. Here was the enemy at last in his clutches, thought Karna. Here was the chance of a lifetime of feud and hostility.

Krishna perceived the critical situation in which his friend Arjuna was now placed, and he was more anxious on that account than Arjuna himself could be in the excitement of fighting. All of a sudden, as by the intervention of some benignant deity, a dark cloud from the west passed over the face of the sun, and obscured its light so completely that Karna thought that the day was done. He threw down his arms, and turned to withdraw from the field. But Arjuna's chariot sped on towards the spot where Jayadratha was still standing encircled

by his guard. And the sun just peeped forth from behind the cloud for a moment, and Arjuna took that moment's opportunity to slay Jayadratha. His great vow was thus fulfilled, and he bore aloft his adversary's head on a tall spear, as he returned in triumph to his camp.

The fall of Jayadratha was the signal for a terrible revenge on the part of the Kurus. For the first time during the war, fighting was continued into the night, and torches gleamed, and swords and armour glittered in the torchlight, and the battle which commenced at sunrise was prolonged until many hours after sunset. Both parties seemed to have been maddened by an unappeasable fury, till at last, by mutual consent, a truce was called and the slaughter suspended.

Duryodhana was again depressed by the day's disasters, and he went over to Drona, and said, "Woe is me! The Kuru ranks are becoming thinner and thinner, and their fighting is growing feebler and feebler. How is it that when a peerless warrior like thee leads our legions, we should ever meet with failure? Or is it the same soft weakness, that palsied the arm of Bhishma, that enfeebles thy limbs too? Or is it because the Pandavas are thy own pupils, that a secret compact binds thee not to smite them as thou shouldst? If this be so, or if either be the case, why dost thou

not, in the name of justice, yield thy place to Karna?"

The Karna-mania came upon Duryodhana each time his army suffered a repulse or a reverse. No less than thrice had he reproached the saintly Bhishma for supposed partiality for the Pandavas, and on each of those occasions he had proposed Karna as the new commander. Now again, when he saw Arjuna triumphantly keeping his vow in the teeth of the most determined attempt to break it, Duryodhana's heart felt helpless, and in its helplessness, took refuge in the hope that Karna would successfully turn the tide.

But Dronacharya gave him the same reply as he had received so often from Bhishma on similar occasions. He said, "Duryodhana,—If thy forces are giving way, thou art but reaping the bloody harvest of thy own sins. Do not charge a grey-headed veteran like me with faithlessness or treachery. Thou art but a child before me. Know this that Arjuna has no equal in the art of war, and that Drona does not need to be reminded of his duty. To convince thee of this, I do hereby take a vow that to-day either Arjuna shall meet his fate at my hands, or my eyes shall be closed for ever!"

When the day dawned the contest waged hotter and fiercer. The laurels of the day were won by Ghatotkacha, the Rakshasa son of Bhima, who

with a Rakshasa's wrath carried death and dismay into the attenuated ranks of the Kurus, and seemed himself to be wielding supernatural powers that rendered him strangely invulnerable. Being a Rakshasa, Ghatotkacha defied both death and capture in the ordinary human way: he could be overcome only by supernatural agency. Now, Karna had in his possession a miraculous dart—the gift of Indra, King of Heaven,—and he was repeatedly urged by his comrades to use it against this resistless Rakshasa, whose further progress meant only further loss to the Kuru forces. Karna was obliged to yield to the importunities of his men, though his own wish was to reserve the weapon for Arjuna. Ghatotkacha immediately fell by this celestial weapon and then there was a brief lull on the battle-field.

But it was a lull like that which precedes a thunderstorm. For immediately the battle-roar began with redoubled violence. After slaying Ghatotkacha, Karna advanced against his ancient enemies, Drupada, King of Panchala, and the Raja of Virata, both of whom were slain the same instant.

So ended that day of dreadful vows dreadfully fulfilled, and Drona's command brought, if not success, at least revenge.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Closing Scenes of the War.

The ghastly tragedy of the war was now draving to a close, the concluding scenes being the fall of Drona, and the death of Karna. But these were enacted not without an accompaniment of the grim and gruesome aspects of war—fallen heads, rolling in the dust; mangled corpses huddled together in heaps; bloated carcasses of war-animals pierced by the spear or crushed underneath the chariot-wheel; piteous moans and hideous groans; thunderous roars and shrilling shrieks; vengeful vows and joyful triumphs.

The morning after the death of Drupada, his son Dhrishtadyumna went forth in search of the slayer of his father, determined to make an end of him, or to perish in the attempt. When Bhima saw the young prince going off to warwith this determination, he caught hold of his armand said, "Thou art too young to avenge thy father's death upon the doughty Drona. That veteran will prove too tough a morsel for thy soft teeth. Leave it to me to fight thy battles for thee: I will avenge thy father's death."

Pushing back the young prince, Bhima rushed upon Drona, and the two warriors had a long and well-contested fight, neither yielding an inch of ground to the other. With all his Herculean strength, Bhima was no match against the Brahman preceptor's trained skill and vast experience.

Krishna perceived the utter futility of waging contests on the basis of brute force alone. So he advised Yudhishtira to make use of stratagem to supplement the strength of arms. Yudhishtira was at first unwilling to adopt what he believed to be tricks of base cunning. His saintly heart would not permit the use of strategic devices sanctioned by the highest standards of military morality. But his advisers pointed out to him the imperative necessity of having recourse to measures of retaliation against a foe whose sole tatics consisted so far of deceit and treachery. They said, "If you are so averse to what is but fair reprisal in war, why have war at all? Why not put an end to all this slaughter and bloodshed by surrendering yourself outright to the hands of Duryodhana? Have you forgotten their honourable dealings with you—the story of the loaded dice, the heavy stakes, the fatal penalty, the insults heaped upon you and upon Draupadi?"

Yudhishtira was speechless to such an appeal. The memory of old wrongs rushed upon his mind

in a flash, and he stood brooding over that painful subject, with brimming eyes and downcast face. His silence was taken to mean what silence usually does—tacit consent, and the Pandavas resolved to make use of an innocent stratagem to foil the redoubtable Drona.

A war-elephant that bore the name of Aswathama was slain by Bhima, and the cry rang through the battle-field that "Aswathama was slain." The cry was taken up and repeated by every Pandava warrior who heard it, though many of them doubtless did not know who was meant,—friend or foe. In a few minutes the shout was passed on from rank to rank down to the furthest extremity of the wide plain. The foemen heard that shout, and took it to mean that Aswathama, the only son of Dronacharya, had been slain. In the tumult and confusion of the battle it was impossible to verify reports, and ill reports as a rule receive readier credence than joyful tidings. With heavy hearts some of the Kuru chiefs went up to Drona to offer condolence. Drona was so shocked by the news that he was loth to believe his own ears: in the first rude blow of grief, conviction maketh a slow entrance into the sorrowing heart. When the first shock was past, and his reason returned to him, Drona came over to the Pandava camp unarmed, to learn the truth from Yudhishtira's

truth-telling lips. "Speak, Yudhishtira," said the old preceptor, "thou hast ever been a truth-teller: is Aswathaman, my own gallant boy, slain in battle?"

Yudhishtira had now a hard problem of casuistry to solve. On the one hand, he was morally bound to tell the truth; on the other, he was under a political and military necessity of telling a lie. And he steered a middle course—if there were a middle course between truth and falsehood—by resorting to a prevarication, and replying, "Aswathama is dead,—I mean the tusker. The explanatory clause of this brief sentence was spoken in an undertone,—not probably a conscious undertone, but one due more to the effects of moral confusion brought on by his being suddenly called upon to face a dilemmatic situation. At any rate, Drona could not catch the last words; and this again might have been due to Drona's own confusion, brought on by the shocking effects of the first part of Yudhishtira's sentence.

Without pausing a moment longer, Dronacharya went back to the field, with a conscious resolve in his heart. But his heart was sinking; his spirit was dead within him; all sense, all motion was gone, save alone the wish for his own death. Dhrishtadyumna marked his opportunity. He remembered Drona as the slayer of his father, and though he

had not been allowed by Bhima to engage in open fight with him, he still remained on the look-out for a chance of avenging his father's death. And now was a splendid chance for him,—Drona was no more the ferocious fighter he was until an hour previously; he was only a hollow semblance of his former self; and he fell an easy mark to Dhrishtadyumna's distant shafts, and the next moment Drona lay on the battle-field—slain.

The Kuru army was now without a leader. Bhishma was still lying on his couch of arrows, hovering between life and death; Drona had just been numbered with the dead; and Duryodhana's forces were left without a head, without a guide. Duryodhana therefore hastened unto Karna and said, "Karna, thou alone canst now save the Kurus in this dreadful war. Bhishma was doubtless a matchless warrior, but a secret partiality for the Pandavas swayed his heart and unnerved his hands. Drona, too, was a peerless warrior, but a latent fondness for his once favourite pupil rendered his prowess practically nugatory. But thou, Karna, art happily free from such symptoms of weakness. Smite our foes hip and thigh, and lead our forces to glorious victory, and thy name shall go down to posterity as the bravest of the brave Kurus."

Karna replied modestly, "I shall discharge my duty faithfully unto my king and country."

Flushed with the pride of new-made honour, Karna drove his battle-car swiftly into the centre of the Pandava forces; the earth shook under the rattling of his chariot; the very heavens reflected his wrath. Death and dismay ruled the battle-field. Karna's chief wish was to pierce Arjuna's heart with his arrow, and Arjuna's fondest desire was to shed the blood of Karna. Hitherto Arjun was busy contending against other foes, and it was through lack of time and through a sort of sufferance that Karna had escaped Arjuna's blow so long. But now that Karna was the commander of the Kuru forces, his removal became an object of supreme importance in the mind of Arjuna. The great Kuru leaders were all gone, one by one, and of the valiant chiefs but few remained; so that, if Karna could be crushed, the further resistance of the Kurus would become impossible or at best a matter of insignificance.

It was not long after the commencement of the day's fighting that these two foremost champions met. A terrible contest was the result,—a contest long longed-for by both parties, long deferred by chance and accident, but now come at last, and none too soon. From morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve, did the two angry combatants wrestle against each other, hand to hand, sword to sword, lance to lance. Each succeeding bout but made

them fiercer, and when the bugles sounded the close of the day the combat was still as undecided as it was when it began.

At night Duryodhana summoned a council of war, at which he said, "Sixteen long days have we spent our breath and spilt our blood in vain. The war is still waging with unabated fury. Hundreds of our heroes have perished, and victory still seems to be far out of sight."

Duryodhana's old depression of spirits had come upon him once more. Never during the whole past fortnight of the war had he been jubilant for a single day, not even when his party was winning point after point of victorious advantage. He had always felt despondent, at times despairing,—and, it would seem, without sufficient cause. In his eagerness to fasten upon something to vent his spleen on, he blamed first Bhishma, and subsequently Drona, and taxed them each with partiality. But his secret motive then was to find some excuse for appointing his favourite, Karna, as commander-in-chief; and now that his favourite was the commander-in-chief, he was still dissatisfied with the progress of the war. The fact was that Duryodhana could not rightly read his own heart; the real cause of all his dissatisfaction was his guilty conscience; but Duryodhana had of course smothered his moral faculty long ago.

Karna knew that Duryodhana constantly needed strong assurances from his commanders to keep his head cool and his heart easy; and so he said unto Duryodhana, "Let the morning dawn, O Duryodhana, and thou shalt see what Karna can accomplish: he shall either slay Arjuna or fall by Arjuna's hand."

Duryodhana's heart became easy again at hearing this strong vow. Strong vows were what he needed most: for they stirred his blood, and soothed his heart with the fancy that victory was at hand. Now was his mind easy again for some hours, and he went quietly to bed and had good sleep during the night.

The morning dawned, and Duryodhana gazed upon the rising sun with fresh hope and courage. Karna's chariot, which was now driven by a new charioteer, Salya, rattled proudly over the battle plain, his gay banner floating jauntily in the breeze. His heart was eager to resume the contest with Arjuna that was left undecided the previous day, and his eyes were wandering in search of Arjuna. But not sighting Arjuna immediately, he thought that the last day's fight had struck terror into his adversary's heart, and that he was therefore hiding his face. So he said to his charioteer, "Arjuna is evidently evading my blows." Salya answered, "Thou shalt meet Arjuna soon enough, I warrant

thee. He is not the man to be afraid of anybody. Thou hadst better look to thy own safety."

Karna frowned at these words, and ordered his chariot to be driven at full speed. He had not gone far when he was opposed by Yudhishtira, borne in a car of resplendent beauty. A band of brave Nishadas tried to deaden the shock of the encounter by interposing themselves between Karna and Yudhishtira; but Karna's powerful arm lightly drove them back. The Panchalas made a similar attempt and met with a similar repulse. Nothing could check the furious Karna, nothing daunt his fiery courage. Like a flaming thunder-bolt he fell upon Yudhishtira. Like a rocky cliff Yudhishtira met the attack, and, drawing his bow fiercely, shot an arrow at Karna which grazed his left shoulder. Karna returned the shot with a flight of arrows which pierced Yudhishtira's armour at many points. The shining coat of mail was reft and cleft, and fell clanking on the ground. But still unarmed as he was, Yudhishtira kept up the fight; and then, one by one, his steeds were slain, his standard was shot off, and his chariot cut to pieces. But still Yudhishtira kept up the contest, until a deadly dart from Karna's bow wounded him sorely, and faint and bleeding, he was carried off from the battle-field by his attendants.

Deep was the sorrow and disappointment of

Yudhishtira to find himself beaten in the only serious encounter he ever had with the enemy. Yudhishtira was not lacking either in courage or in bodily strength; if he had any weakness it was the weakness of "looking too precisely on the event,"—a weakness due to an overgrowth of the moral faculty; and it was this same weakness that now made him a prey to fits of despair alternated with bursts of strong indignation. He lay in his tent entranced,—not by pain, but by mental anguish and impotent rage. He lay with closed eyes, as though asleep. Arjuna peeped into the tent to see how his wounded brother was doing, and, seeing him asleep, was quietly moving back, when Yudhishtira called out, "Arjuna?

"Yes," answered Arjuna.

"Hast thou made an end of Karna yet?" asked Yudhishtira."

Arjuna thereupon entered the tent, and Krishna followed him. "No, not yet," said Arjuna, and he was going to add something, when Krishna interrupted him and explained to Yudhishtira that Arjuna had so far been fighting in distant parts of the field, but that he had taken a vow to slay Karna in the course of the day.

Yudhishtira was very wrathful to hear this, and he spoke sarcastically to Arjuna, "Wherefore hast thou dressed thyself like a warrior, with helmet

on head and bow in hand, when with the heart of a woman thou shunnest the might of thy fiercest foe Karna? Better yield thy famous *Gandiva* bow unto worthier hands, and hide thy face in some dark corner, while thy proud enemy tramples upon thy friends and rules the field!"

Arjuna's whole frame shook with uncontrollable rage at this bitter unbrotherly reproach; and his hand unconsciously sought the hilt of his sword and drew it from the scabbard. In his heat of anger he had forgotten that it was a brother and a king that had uttered these words. Krishna perceived the danger, and admonished Arjuna not to stain his sword with the blood of a brother in a moment of passion. Arjuna blushed with shame, and instantly craved pardon of his elder for the sin that his rage had led him into. Yudhishtira freely forgave his younger, and holding him to his bosom, said, "I have wronged thee, brother; 'twas no fault of thine. Hasty words of anger passed thoughtlessly from my lips. I had no control over myself. My heart is racked with a pain that overmasters all softer feelings. But now let me wipe off the cruel wrong with brotherly kindness. Take my blessing, and with its aid go thou and vanquish thy foe."

Arjuna replied with tears in his eyes, "I will not put off this armour until I have slain Karna!"

With this vow, Arjuna dashed his chariot into

the densest squares of the Kuru legions. Karna rode forward to meet him, and the two champions, who had often met and often parted, met once again to part no more. Arjuna's arrows fell thick and fast like summer's rain, until, with overstraining, his bow-string snapped in twain. Never was warrior placed in a more critical situation.

Arjuna cried for a truce to mend his bow. It was an article of the Kshattriya's code of honour not to fight an unarmed foe, and to this article Arjuna appealed when he asked his opponent to pause. But Karna, who was thirsting for Arjuna's blood, was not likely to obey codes of honour. He paid no heed to Arjuna's request, and took that occasion to hurl his heaviest darts upon Arjuna, in hopes of crushing him before he got a chance of arming himself again. Arjuna was overmatched for a time, and bore the enemy's attacks as patiently as he could; but as soon as he had regained the use of his bow he showered shots upon Karna with resistless might. But Arjuna's arrows were as ineffective as Karna's, and for a long while the contest waged equal on both sides, and it appeared as though it would end again in a draw. By an unforeseen chance one of the wheels of Karna's car stuck fast in the mud, and Karna called for a moment's truce, appealing to the same laws of honour which he had so cruelly contemned just a while ago.

Krishna now got an opportunity of a fitting retort, and he said to Karna, "Dost thou make thy appeal now to the laws of honour that thou hast thyself just dishonoured? What can such a one as thou have to do with laws of honour? Didst thou observe the laws of honour when with Shakuni thou didst rob Yudhishtira of his wealth and treasure? Didst thou obey the laws of honour when thou didst insult Draupadi in the council hall? Didst thou abide by the laws of honour when, leaguing thyself with half-a-dozen dastardly ruffians, thou didst fall on Abhimanyu and murder him in cold blood?"

Karna was deeply abashed. He leaped down from his chariot, and fought on foot, while Arjuna, now occupying a position of vantage, drew his *Gandiva* bow, aiming directly at the head of his adversary, and with a single masterly shot laid him low on the bosom of mother earth, dooming him never to rise again.

CHAPTER XVII.

End of the War.

The death of Karna left the Kuru forces again without a leader. The soldiers fled hither and thither in terror, and confusion was deepening into chaos. The sage Kripacharya then went to Duryodhana and said, "Thy army is now without a commander, and without a commander the best army is but a rabble. Arjuna will have no difficulty now in mowing them down like a hayfield. There has been enough of bloodshed on both sides: let those who have escaped death so far escape it still. Do not doom thy dynasty to utter extinction. There is yet time to save something. Sue for peace—Yudhishtira's kindly heart cannot decline peace at any time."

Duryodhana replied, "O Kripa, thy words are good and wise. Thou hast ever been an advocate of peace, thou man of peace; but I fear thy counsels of perfection are scarcely suited to the present world. I do not for one moment believe that Yudhishtira will again accept our friendship, or that Bhima will forget his vow, or that Arjuna will forgive

the death of Abhimanyu. And then, how can I myself turn traitor to the memories of those honoured kinsmen of whose destruction I myself have been the cause? How can I sit unavenged of deeds that cry loudly for vengeance? How can I, as a king, bend the supple knee and sue for grace? That would be an ignominy and a shame far worse than any defeat. Salya, king of Madra, shall lead my forces to-day; and we will not slacken our bow-strings as long as a single soldier lives to carry on the war."

The fall of Karna rejoiced the hearts of the Pandavas, but did not make them over-confident. They knew that the new Kuru captain was a mere figurehead; but they also knew the folly of underrating an enemy's strength. The Pandava brothers ranged round Yudhishtira, to defend his person against any possible attacks that might be directed against him by the new Kuru leader, but he addressed them as follows:—

"Brothers,—You have bravely done your share of fighting as you have heroically endured your share of suffering. Let me to-day conduct the Pandava attacks against the forces of Salya. Satyaki shall guard my right wing, and Dhrishtadyumna my left. Let Bhima lead the van, and Arjuna bring up the rear; while I myself shall command the central division. By this arrangement I do hope to overcome the enemy in one blow."

Yudhishtira kept his word and fought valiantly. Well was it for the Pandavas that their own king was the commander on the last day of the battle. The fighting, however, was of the worst type—irregular, intermittent, spasmodic. The eddies of the war still whirled round the two commanders, Salya and Yudhishtira. Salya fought like the luckless leader of a forlorn hope; Yudhishtira fought with the cool courage of the captain of a righteous cause. Thick and fast were the arrows shot forth from his bow, and fell in showers upon the doomed head of Salya. The tattered Kuru banner was once more shot away—the last rallying-post of the routed Kurus was knocked down. Salya himself was slain not long after, and the battle-field then became a gigantic slaughter-house. The Pandavas in their triumph plied the sword right and left, cutting wide swaths through the standing lines of the Kuru soldiery. Sahadeva slew the false gambler, Shakuni, who had survived till the last; Bhima struck down the wicked Dhusasana with his huge mace; and then cut off his head, and drank his blood, as he had vowed to do. "Ho! ho!" he cried, "never have I tasted a sweeter draught." Duryodhana himself fled in terror from the battlefield, and all that was left of the mighty host were three trembling captives—Aswathama, son of Drona, who had been

given out as dead, the Brahman sage, Kripacharya, and the Brahman bowman, Kirtavarma.

King Duryodhana of Hastinapur was now a helpless fugitive. As he was running away from the battle-field he thought it a wise precaution to take with him his miraculous mace, for he feared he might be chased or intercepted or molested on the way. Not far from the foughten field there was a large lake, and within its hospitable waters Duryodhana took shelter, awaiting an opportunity of further escape. He was master of a secret art of diving under water, and remaining underneath for days together like a fish; so he dived in this lake and lay concealed below the water's surface.

Meanwhile there were rejoicings in the Pandava camp ; but to Yudhishtira's mind there was no occasion for joy, but only of grief for the death of slaughtered friends and kinsmen ; for the slain on both sides were his own folk, bound by ties of blood, ties of home, ties of love. Hence, whilst the others were exulting in their victory, the Pandava king was sad at heart, mourning for the loss of his clansmen and chiefs. Like another famous king of ancient times, he mourned :

"Behold ! I seem but king among the dead."

Just at that moment, word was brought that Duryodhana had been discovered lying concealed in a lake. That information brought some consolation

to his sorrowing heart, not because it offered a prospect of capturing the arch-enemy, but because it gave him a chance of coming to terms with him, of receiving back in peace his lost kingdom of Indraprastha and of restoring to Duryodhana his conquered kingdom of Hastinapur. His magnanimous heart could not brook the idea of revenge even now. All he wished was to gain back what was his own by right of blood: he did not care to touch a particle of what had become his own by right of conquest; and his kingly heart would have been happy to see Duryodhana ruling once more his old kingdom of Hastinapur, with the Pandava king as his brother and his ally. So, as soon as he heard of Duryodhana's whereabouts, he hastened to the margin of the lake, and shouted out his name as loudly as he could. Duryodhana at first responded not; but on being challenged to a personal combat by Yudhishtira, he said, "Take my empire, and be happy in thy sovereignty over it. Leave me alone: I shall betake myself to the forest and spend the remainder of my life in prayer and penance."

Yudhishtira replied, "I cannot take aught that I have not won in fair field: I cannot take a gift."

Duryodhana rejoined: "If thou promise to fight, one against one, I am willing to come out, and fight you all to a man."

Yudhishtira accepted this condition, but still Duryodhana tarried, and the angry Bhima, incensed at the delay, growled forth, " If thou dost not come out of the water, then, false crocodile, I will jump in and drag thee out."

Then Duryodhana appeared on the shore, and Bhima burst forth into a loud laugh at the sight of his muddy face and dripping garments.

"Nay," said the Kuru prince, " I'll turn thy laughter into lamentation "

It was Bhima's lifelong vow to dash down Duryodhana on the ground, and it was Bhima therefore who first offered to fight against him. Both were skilful in wielding the mace, and both were sworn enemies of each other. The two warriors fought like two wild bulls, their faces spotted with blood, their eyes flashing fire, their mouths foaming and frothing. One moment Duryodhana very nearly overcame Bhima, on whose head he struck a blow that staggered him almost to the ground; but soon he recovered himself, and returned a blow on his antagonist, cracking his knee-bones to pieces, so that Duryodhana fell flat on the ground, with his face kissing the dust.

Bhima's vow was fulfilled, and he danced gleefully round Duryodhana, saying, " Now is Draupadi avenged at last ! "

Yudhishtira was wrathful upon Bhima for

insulting a fallen foe, and ordered him to be removed from the place, so that he might not cause further offence to Duryodhana's wounded spirits; and when Bhima was gone, Yudhishtira knelt down beside Duryodhana, and said, "Thou art still our king and chief!"

But Duryodhana's eyes were closed; his senses were taking leave of him; he marked not the kneeling homage of the Pandava king, nor spoke a word in reply or acknowledgment. And when night fell, the dying chief was visited by the surviving leaders of the Kuru army, who made their last homage to their departing monarch, just before his eyes were closed in the sleep of death.

The bodies of the slain warriors that were lying scattered all over the battle-field, were collected at one spot and laid each upon a funeral pyre, and with due ceremony each pyre was lighted and the bodies cremated. The first pile that was set fire to was Duryodhana's. The Pandavas observed mourning along with the Kauravas, for, though long severed by a cruel death-feud, both were sprung from a common stock, and were united by close ties of kingship such as necessitate common mourning observances among the Hindus.

The condition of the blind old monarch, Dhritarashtra, was now exceedingly pitiable. His sons were all slain; his troops were cut down to

a man; his heart was rent in pieces. Blind as he was, he insisted on visiting the battle-field to be present at the colossal funeral. The dames and princesses of the royal household, likewise, came to the funeral, and with their weeping and wailing added to the misery of the blind king, whose blindness deprived him of what little consolation the sight of the dear dead faces might have brought to the bereaved heart. High-born ladies, royal dames, who had never passed out of the palace-walls, walked bare-faced, bare-foot, through the public streets, as they wended their slow way to the scene of mourning. Soft eyes that were like the lotus were now red and sore with weeping; beauty like that of the Houries of Paradise now lay soiled in the dust; tresses, through the tangled net of which the breeze played wantonly, were now hanging dishevelled, never to be tied into a knot again; foreheads gleaming with the glow of the sacred vermilion were now as pale as ashes; limbs that were bedecked with the rarest gems were now as bare as a rock. Hundreds of such peerless princesses had been widowed by the war; hundreds more had lost their sons or their brothers, or their fathers; and countless more had lost more than one of these. It was impossible to say whose loss was heaviest, whose affliction most crushing; each of them mourned as if she had lost everything she

had on earth. They beat their breasts, they tore their hair, they rolled on the ground in their agony of sorrow. And the blind old monarch stood over them all, sightless and motionless in his speechless woe.

The lamentation of Queen Gandhari was the most heart-rending of all. She clasped the dead bodies of her sons one by one, fondled them with affection, and spoke endearing words unto their unlistening ears. For a time she behaved as though her sons were all alive, as though she were welcoming them home from the battle-field: her maternal heart refused for a time to give utterance to maternal grief. At last she burst into a sing-song lamentation in the following strain:—

"Is this my son Duryodhana? Is this he who erstwhile left home in the highest spirits, prancing with delight like his own prancing steed? When going to the war, he solicited my blessing, 'Mother,' said he, 'wish me joy and success.' I answered, 'Son, Heaven guard thee from a cruel fate. Fear not, my son,—where there is Right there is victory.' Alas! who knew then that those were to be my last words to him? But him I mourn not so much as I pity my royal husband. O, how will he support himself in this crushing affliction in his weak old age? Yes, my son was brave and princely, resistless in war, a terror to his foes,

the foremost monarch of his age, the greatest hero of the day. Alas! now he sleeps the sleep of warriors; he has gained the warrior's heaven. As his body is sleeping upon the blood-stained earth, his soul is reposing upon the bosom of his Maker. O, shall I grieve my own grief, or pity that other bereaved soul, the widow of my dear Duryodhana, who has lost both husband and son. Lo! how she steps from one slaughtered hero to the other, clasps her husband, and then her Lakshamana, as if uncertain which were the nobler, which the dearer of the two. Thirteen years did my Duryodhana rule the Kuru kingdom, and the proudest monarchs envied the splendours of his court, and the happiness and prosperity of his empire. Alas! the Kuru kingdom is now without a sovereign, and my Duryodhana is holding his court in another world. And that other world is assuredly the highest Heaven, if the *Vedas* tell the truth, if the gods do not speak with lying lips."

The cremation ceremony took an enormous length of time, not only because the number of the dead was enormous, but also because the lamentations of the mourning ladies were long and ceaseless. It was difficult to recover the dead bodies from their kisses and embraces and to set them burning. At last, each of the bodies was literally torn from some tender breast or other, and cremated in proper

form. When the cremation was over, the concourse of mourners proceeded to the banks of the Ganges to bathe in the holy stream and to offer oblations to the departed souls. And when the oblations were being performed, Queen Pritha stepped up to her weeping sons (the Pandavas) and made a revelation of the secret birth of Karna,—he, who was until the last known to be the deadliest foe of Arjuna, turned out to be his own brother. Karna himself had come to know this from the lips of the dying Bhishma, but no one else was in the secret until the sorrowing mother disclosed it to the Pandavas and asked them to offer oblations to him, who was the eldest of them all.

Then followed the proclamation of Yudhishtira as the Emperor of a reunited Kingdom of Hastinapur. But no pomp, no dignity, no wealth could compensate for the privations that Yudhishtira had borne in his exile or the losses he had suffered in the war. His heart was heavy and the gaiety and glitter of returning royalty only served to rewaken his old melancholy. Day and night his mind brooded over the sinful slaughter of kinsmen, the cruel carnage of the Kurukshettra war. At length the holy sage, Vyasa, appeared before him and advised him to perform an *Ashwamedha yajna* or Horse Sacrifice, which he said would worthily atone for all his sins.

Search was accordingly made for a steed of moonlight whiteness in colour, with one black ear; and when such a horse was found, a gold plate, with the name of Yudhishtira engraved on it, was fastened round its forehead, and the horse was then let loose and allowed to wander at will, attended by a strong force under the command of Arjuna. The Horse Sacrifice being a declaration of suzerainty over surrounding kingdoms, the custom was that, if any neighbouring king ventured to catch the animal, it was taken as a signal for war, and the king concerned had to fight a pitched battle with the army accompanying the horse. If he was defeated, he had to contribute an additional force to increase the strength of the army. If no king ventured to detain the horse, it was a sign that all the neighbouring kings were willing to acknowledge the suzerainty of the sovereign who owned the animal. And when the horse returned from its wanderings it was sacrificed with great pomp and splendour.

It was on the night of the full moon in the month of *Chaitra* (March-April) that Yudhishtira let loose the white horse as a token of his intention to perform the *Ashwamedha* ceremony. Arjuna, who accompanied the steed in its wanderings, met with a number of adventures. His first encounter was with the king of Malwa, who detained the animal

and thus offered battle to Arjuna. Arjuna defeated him, and the Raja thereafter accompanied Arjuna as an ally. Other encounters followed, and then the horse entered the kingdom of Manipur, the Raja of which refused to acknowledge Yudhishtira's supremacy, and Arjuna had to crush his resistance and convert him into a friend. And thus, from kingdom to kingdom, the horse wandered at its own sweet will for one whole year, during which interval Yudhishtira led the life of the greatest austerity, such as a hermit leads in the forest. He ate a single meal, abstained from meat, and slept on the ground.

At last, at the end of a year, Arjuna returned home with the steed, and there were great rejoicings through the city. The victorious army was welcomed with showers of applause and heaps of reward.

The full moon of the month of *Magh* (December-January) was the day appointed for the *Ashwamedha* ceremony, which was held upon a bit of consecrated ground, previously prepared for that purpose. The kings and chiefs of the neighbourhood were invited to witness the ceremony. Stately pavilions, resplendent with gold and gems, had been set up to accommodate the royal guests; and humbler lodgings were assigned to humbler men. The Brahmans occupied a block apart from the rest.

An enormous canopy of gold was set up in an open square within the palace area, and seats were arranged round it as for a Darbar, the higher dignitaries getting seats nearer the throne, the lower ones further and further down, in rows upon rows, far-stretching to the furthest gaze. On a lofty dais, spread over with cloth of gold, were placed two stately thrones of massive gold, one for Maharaja Dhritarashtra, the other for Raja Yudhishtira. The royal ladies were ranged together in their appointed places on both sides of the royal throne.

When all the guests and spectators were seated in their places, the ceremonies of the day commenced. Yudhishtira and Draupadi, with one end each of their wearing-cloth tied together into a matrimonial knot, performed a holy bath in the waters of the Ganges. Then a portion of ground was measured out, and Yudhishtira ploughed it with a golden plough drawn by a pair of milk-white bullocks, while Draupadi followed the plough and sowed seeds of every kind of food-grain grown in the kingdom, while the priests chanted holy texts from the Vedas, and the female spectators sang songs of rejoicing and songs of benediction.

A golden altar had been built in the centre of the quadrangle, a cubit high from the ground, and on this altar were drawn geometrical figures representing the position and motion of the most propitious

heavenly bodies. In the centre of this altar, a small square space was left free, and on this was arranged a little stack of chips of sandalwood, overhung by a little canopy of silk. This sandalwood stack was in time set fire to, and *ghee*, barley, and other sacred offerings were thrown into it; and the fire blazed, and the scented smoke curled and rose and spread holy fragrance all over the sacrificial site.

Then sixty-four of the assembled kings and chiefs proceeded in a procession to bring water from the Ganges, and this water was then sprinkled over the head of Yudhishtira, to the accompaniment of music and of appropriate *mantras*.

Next followed the making of gifts to Brahmans, and the presentation of suitable tokens to the vassal chiefs, many of whom received jewelled aigrettes and other decorations, while to others were given horses and elephants or shawls and robes of honour.

The sacrificial horse was then bathed in holy water, and Bhima took a scimitar in his hand and struck off its head at a single blow. The head of the animal is said to have mysteriously vanished, while the body was cut up and portions of the pure holy flesh were offered to the sacrificial fire.

More ceremonies followed, which it would be tedious to describe in detail. Suffice it to say, that every detail of the sacrifice as laid down in the

sacred books was closely followed; everything was done which was necessary to heighten the splendour or add to the solemnity of the ceremony, which took up more than a week in actual celebration. Last but not least was the feeding of the Brahmans—a function without which the greatest sacrifice loses all its spiritual merit. Bhima was in charge of this part of the ceremony, which in itself was a colossal affair, involving as it did the cooking and the catering for thousands of guests seated to a sumptuous dinner at one time. When the feasting was over, each of the Brahmans received a separate cash gift, and when all had had their dinner and had received their cash fee, the chorus of blessings pronounced by those ten thousand lips made a music like the roar of the sea.

The kingdom of Hastinapur throve and flourished under Yudhishtira's wise rule; peace, love, truth and justice came in again and made a home there; the palace at Indraprastha, which had fallen into decay during his banishment, was rebuilt, and maintained as an additional royal residence; and the healing hand of time was set to work to restore whatever else had been lost or damaged by neglect, corruption or tyranny.

But blind old Dhritarashtra never ceased to mourn the death of Duryodhana, his first-born son, who, with all his faults, was still the father's chief

favourite. Yudhishtira served the old Maharaja as dutifully as a son, and as assiduously as a slave, and did nothing without taking his permission, so that the bereaved King might be made as happy as was possible under the circumstances. But nothing could cheer the old man in his heavy affliction ; nothing could make up for the irreparable loss he had sustained in the last stage of his life ; nothing could lift the load of melancholy pressing on his heart. He was weary of the world ; the gewgaws of royalty appeared to him but vain shows ; his heart longed for the peace that passeth understanding. So, at length, he retired from human society and betook himself to the solitude of a forest, and with him went Queen Gandhari and the wise Vidura. Yudhishtira and a large concourse of state officials accompanied the party right up to the borders of the forest, and then the Maharaja bade them return, and took leave of them in the following speech :—

"My dear children—You all know that I disencumbered myself of the burdens of royalty many years ago by abdicating the throne in favour of my late son, Duryodhana ; and now, after his lamentable death, have I had the same pleasure in making over the empire to the care of my dear nephew, Yudhishtira, who has always been like a son to me. I have long grown old and decrepit, worn out by time

and trouble, and slowly tottering to my fall. Further than that, it hath been the will of God to deprive me of my eyes, so that, as before, I have only that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude. And in that solitude, therefore, I have thought meet to spend the little remainder of my life that may be left to me. If during the long years I have stood at the helm of the state I have done aught that has conduced to your good, I can take to myself just as little a share of credit as I can of any blame that may be due for acts of wrong that might have emanated from the directions of the Government. And I fear, my children, there has been much of wrong—though I shall not embitter your feelings and mine by alluding to events that are now, happily, matters of the past. Gentlemen, the destinies of the Kuru kingdom are now entrusted to your care, and it is yours now to make them or to mar them. But, remember, that the richest legacy that has been bequeathed to you is not this magnificent empire, or the costly appendages of monarchy, but those brilliant traditions of this noble house, which it is your highest duty jealously to guard and scrupulously to uphold. My parting words to you are—that as long as you will be just and humane, no foe, however powerful, can injure one hair of your head."

Yudhishtira reverentially touched the Maharaja's

feet, and receiving his blessings came back to Hastinapur. And then he reigned in peace and glory, proving himself a just and benevolent ruler, loved by his people, feared by his enemies, and respected by his neighbours. But though outwardly conforming to the dignities and the duties of sovereignty, inwardly Yudhishtira's heart pined for the solitude of the forest. His mind repeatedly and persistently dwelt upon those thirteen years that he had spent as a homeless exile; the free air of the forest, the life of Arcadian simplicity, the undisturbed peace and calm he enjoyed during that period, which, by constant comparison with the present, had begun to be regarded by him as the happiest period of his life. Nor was his grief for his lost kinsmen, slain in that execrable fratricidal war, forgotten in any degree. Not a single day passed when he was not reminded of his sorrow, and of those dear souls who, but for that war, would have made both home and empire cheerful. Nor were fresh griefs wanting to cause fresh wounds to his heart. Only two years after the departure of Dhritarashtra, the sage Narada brought word to him that a great fire had swept through the forest, and that the blind old monarch, and Queen Gandhari and all who were with them, had perished in the flames.

This blow was followed by a severer one not

long after. A messenger came from Dwarka to say that Arjuna had been hastily summoned by Krishna. Arjuna left for Dwarka as speedily as he could, but before he arrived, Krishna had quitted this life, and Arjuna's mournful duty was to watch the funeral of his trustiest friend. The death of Krishna was quickly followed by that of his brother, Balarama, and his father, Vasudeva. Not long after Arjuna's return from Dwarka, the sea rose and swallowed up the whole city, and the famous sea-girt capital of the Yadava dynasty was no more!

When Arjuna brought the news of the death of Krishna and the extinction of the Yadava kingdom, Yudhishtira's sorrow knew no bounds. The melancholy that harassed his mind deepened into a settled gloom which nothing could dispel; he grew weary of the weight of the body itself,—and he longed incessantly to lay down his life and its fardels. He communicated his feelings to his brothers, and proposed that he should be allowed to go to the forest and live like a hermit, spending his days in divine contemplation. The brothers cheerfully gave assent to his proposal, and expressed their readiness to accompany him, for they, too, like Yudhishtira, had grown tired of the toils and turmoils of life, and longed for peace and rest.

Yudhishtira thereupon divided the kingdom of Hastinapur into two halves, one of which he gave

to Parikshit, a posthumous son of Abhimanyu, whom he set up as King of Hastinapur, the other going to Yuyutsu, a half-brother of Duryodhana, who was made Raja of Indraprastha. And he counselled the new kings to live at peace and amity.

The Pandavas then threw aside their kingly robes, their jewels and their weapons, and put on the garb of hermits, and, taking Draupadi with them, they started for the forest, followed by a faithful hound, who refused to be left behind. They marched due east, day after day, week after week, through gloomy forests, across burning plains, over broad and swift streams. They had left home with the resolute determination never to return; they were going on a voluntary exile; they were escaping not the wrath of an enemy, but the weary load of life itself. The hardest toils, the severest sufferings, the pangs of hunger and thirst, instead of proving sources of pain, were now thrice welcome, offering as they did a prospect of their release from the galling chain of earthly life.

Not many days had passed when Draupadi, the weakest of the party, dropped down on the way, senseless—lifeless. There was no wailing for her; death had ceased to be an evil to be mourned for, and had become a happy emancipation from the thraldom of life.

When Draupadi fell down dead, Bhima asked Yudhishtira, "Why has Draupadi fallen dead? Why has she not gone alive to heaven? What sin had she committed that she should suffer death?"

These questions were not put in the style of a mourner, but in a spirit of philosophical and religious inquiry. And Yudhishtira answered, "Her heart, and her life were one with Arjuna's, and since Arjuna has sinned, she has sinned too, and she has suffered the common penalty of sin."

The twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, were the next to fall on the way. And the rest marched on, as though nothing had happened, as though everything had been planned and settled beforehand.

But when Arjuna died, a little shiver ran through the heart of Bhima, and he asked Yudhishtira, "O, why has the faultless Arjuna suffered the penalty of sin?"

Yudhishtira replied, "Because he once boasted that he could destroy all his enemies at one blow; this he had not been able to achieve; and the boast came to amount to a lie; and a lie is a sin; and the wages of sin is death."

Bhima and Yudhishtira alone were now left, and the two brothers walked on in silence, followed, as before, by the faithful hound. One day Bhima too dropped down with a sigh, and feeling that his

death was hastening, he asked Yudhishtira, "Canst thou say for what sin I myself am meeting my death? So far as I believe, I have never consciously committed any sin."

Yudhishtira replied, "Yes, thou hast sinned, not in deed, but in character. Thou wast given to cursing, and to gluttony, and to pride."

Yudhishtira was now left alone, and he marched on calmly and silently, followed by the dog. At last, he reached the foot of Mount Meru, and then he heard the voice of Indra calling out to him, "Ascend into heaven, O righteous King." But Yudhishtira replied, "No, no, I cannot go alone. Let my brothers and the princess Draupadi, whom I have lost and left on the way, enter likewise. They have been true and noble in their lives. Hear me, O Indra, and grant my prayer!"

Indra answered from above, "Thy brothers and thy queen have preceded thee."

Yudhishtira then asked that his faithful hound might be allowed to accompany him into heaven, as he accompanied him all through life. But Indra said that heaven was no place for unclean dogs. Yudhishtira urged that he could not feel happy without the dog, since the faithful creature had followed him like a friend all through life.

Indra replied, "Thou hast cheerfully abandoned thy brothers and thy queen, as they dropped one by

one on the way : why canst thou not abandon a vile dog ?"

Yudhishtira explained, " I had no option but to abandon those that were dead : the dead cannot be brought back to life. But this faithful animal still breathes by my side, and how can I desert him ?"

So saying, he turned round towards the dog, and lo ! the dog had vanished, and in its place stood Dharma, God of Justice, who said unto Yudhishtira, " O Yudhishtira, thou hast indeed been all through life a true son of mine. Thou wouldst not abandon me, thy hound, because I was faithful unto thee. Thou hadst no equal on earth : thou shalt have no compeer in heaven."

Yudhishtira was then lifted up bodily into heaven, and lo ! as he entered he saw Duryodhana sitting upon a royal throne of transcendent glory, and the principal Kuru chieftains who had been slain in the war, standing around the throne. He looked upon the brilliant scene with rapt admiration, but as he cast his eyes around, he could not see his brothers nor Draupadi. He was looking amazed and perplexed, when Indra, guessing his feeling, said, " Dost thou wonder why thy brothers and thy queen are not to be found in heaven ? Well, I must tell thee now that they were sinners, and as such they could not enter here. They are

dwelling now in another abode. Thou must live apart from them, and enjoy the bliss of heaven for thyself, leaving those others to suffer what they deserve. All earthly ties are here broken up, and new ones are created."

But Yudhishtira was not prepared to live apart from his brothers and his queen, even in the abodes of the blessed. He protested to Indra, "I cannot live with the Kauravas in heaven. I prefer living with my brothers and my wife, wherever they might be. I cannot selfishly desert those who were knit to me by indissoluble bonds of love."

"Art thou prepared," asked Indra angrily, "to suffer the torments of hell for their sake?"

Yudhishtira replied, "Love will turn those torments to bliss. Let me go where my brothers are, where Draupadi is. How can I leave them?"

One of Indra's heavenly attendants was then ordered to conduct Yudhishtira to where the other Pandavas were, and Yudhishtira was taken a long way, downward and downward, into the nether regions below the surface of the earth. There the atmosphere was pitchy dark, and the air so full of sulphurous smoke that no living creature could breathe it without constant suffocation. The paths were paved with slabs of solid fire, and bordered with ghostly skulls screaming forth the wildest yelling shrieks. In the centre there was an

enormous pit blazing like ten thousand furnaces in one, and in this fiery pit were lying the Pandava brothers and Queen Draupadi, howling with pain and consumed in everlasting fire.

Yudhishtira was intensely horrified, and shrank back with dread and pain; but just then he heard the voice of his brothers and Draupadi entreating him to stay a while, as his presence brought them a shade of relief from their insufferable torments. Yudhishtira could not possibly decline such a request, even though it cost him the same tortures as he witnessed in others. He decided to stay on, and so he dismissed his heavenly guide saying, "You may leave me now; I will stay here to relieve the pain of my brothers and Draupadi."

Just at that moment, a wonderful change came over the whole scene. The abode of darkness and torment was in one moment transformed into a place of brightness and bliss. The momentary glimpse of hell that appeared before Yudhishtira's eyes was only an illusion presented to him to test his faith and love. And when his faith and love had so successfully stood that severest of tests, he was led to the Ganges, the Ganges as she flows in heaven, the stream of bliss and purity, and there he was bathed in its sacred waters. The bath transmuted his gross mortal body into an ethereal, celestial essence, and as a celestial he was now admitted into the

highest Heaven, Swarga, where he was welcomed by his constant friend, Krishna, now surrounded by a heavenly glory which far outshone the brightest earthly splendour that mortal eyes have ever beheld. And there, too, he beheld his brothers and his queen, Draupadi, and every one else whom he had loved on earth.